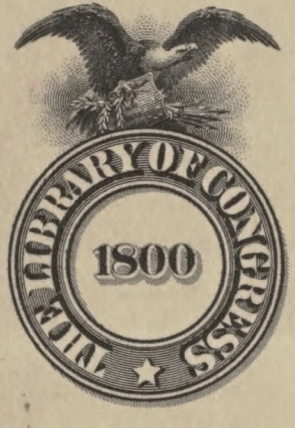

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A WORLD OF GIRLS

THE STORY OF A SCHOOL

BY

L. T. MEADE

AUTHOR OF "WILTON CHASE," "A SWEET GIRL GRADUATE," "GIRLS NEW AND OLD," "FOUR ON AN ISLAND," "BASHFUL FIFTEEN," "RED ROSE AND TIGER LILY," "PALACE BEAUTIFUL," "RING OF RUBIES," "BETTY, A SCHOOL GIRL," "POLLY, A NEW-FASHIONED GIRL," "OUT OF THE FASHION," "GOOD LUCK," "A GIRL IN TEN THOUSAND," ETC., ETC.

WITH ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATIONS BY

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A WORLD OF GIRLS:

THE STORY OF A SCHOOL.

CHAPTER I.

"GOOD-BYE" TO THE OLD LIFE.

"ME want to see Hetty," said an imperious baby voice.

"No, no; not this morning, Miss Nan, dear."

"Me do want to see Hetty," was the quick, impatient reply. And a sturdy indignant little face looked up at Nurse, to watch the effect of the last decisive words.

Finding no affirmative reply on Nurse's placid face, the small lips closed firmly—two dimples came and went on two very round cheeks—the mischievous brown eyes grew full of laughter, and the next moment the little questioner had squeezed her way through a slightly open door, and was toddling down the broad stone stairs and across a landing to Hetty's room. The room-door was open, so the truant went in. A bed with the bed-clothes all tossed about, a half worn-out slipper on the floor, a very untidy dressing-table met her eyes, but no Hetty.

"Me want Hetty, me do," piped the treble voice, and then the little feet commenced a careful and watchful pilgrimage, the lips still firmly shut, the dimples coming and going, and the eyes throwing

many upward glances in the direction of Nurse and the nursery.

No pursuit as yet, and great, great hope of finding Hetty somewhere in the down-stair regions. Ah, now, how good! those dangerous stairs had been descended, and the little voice calling in shrill tones for Hetty rang out in the wide hall.

"Let her come to me," suddenly said an answering voice, and a girl of about twelve, dressed in deep mourning, suddenly opened the door of a small study and clasped the little one in her arms.

"So you have found me, my precious, my dearest! Brave, plucky little Nan, you have got away from Nurse and found me out! Come into the study now, darling, and you shall have some breakfast."

"Me want a bicky, Hetty," said the baby voice; the round arms clasped Hester's neck, but the brown eyes were already travelling eagerly over the breakfast table in quest of spoil for those rosy little lips.

"Here are two biscuits, Nan. Nan, look me in the face—here, sit steady on my knee; you love me, don't you, Nan?"

"Course me do," said the child.

"And I'm going away from you, Nan, darling. For months and months I won't see anything of you. My heart will be always with you, and I shall think of you morning, noon, and night. I love no one as I love you, Nan. You will think of me, and love me too; won't you, Nan?"

"Me will," said Nan; "me want more bicky, Hetty."

"Yes, yes," answered Hester; "put your arms tight round my neck, and you shall have sugar, too. Tighter than that, Nan, and you shall have two lumps

of sugar—oh, yes, you shall—I don't care if it makes you sick—you shall have just what you want the last moment we are together."

Baby Nan was only too pleased to crumple up a crape frill and to smear a black dress with sticky little fingers for the sake of the sugar which Hetty plied her with.

"More, Hetty," she said; "me'll skeeze 'oo vedy tight for more."

On this scene Nurse unexpectedly entered.

"Well, I never! and so you found your way all down-stairs by yourself, you little toddle. Now, Miss Hetty, I hope you haven't been giving the precious lamb sugar; you know it never does suit the little dear. Oh, fie! baby; and what sticky hands! Miss Hetty, she has crumpled all your crape frills."

"What matter?" said Hester. "I wanted a good hug, and I gave her three or four lumps. Babies won't squeeze you tight for nothing. There, my Nancy, go back to Nurse. Nurse, take her away; I'll break down in a minute if I see her looking at me with that little pout."

Nurse took the child into her arms.

"Good-bye, Miss Hester, dear. Try to be a good girl at school. Take my word, missy—things won't be as dark as they seem."

"Good-bye, Nurse," said Hester hastily. "Is that you, father? are you calling me?"

She gathered up her muff and gloves, and ran out of the little study where she had been making believe to eat breakfast. A tall, stern-looking man was in the hall, buttoning on an overcoat; a brougham waited at the door. The next moment Hester and her father were bowling away in the direction of the

nearest railway station. Nan's little chubby face had faded from view. The old square, grey house, sacred to Hester because of Nan, had also disappeared ; the avenue even was past, and Hester closed her bright brown eyes. She felt that she was being pushed out into a cold world, and was no longer in the same snug nest with Nan. An intolerable pain was at her heart ; she did not glance at her father, who during their entire drive occupied himself over his morning paper. At last they reached the railway station, and just as Sir John Thornton was handing his daughter into a comfortable first-class carriage, marked "For Ladies only," and was presenting her with her railway ticket and a copy of the last week's illustrated newspaper, he spoke—

"The guard will take care of you, Hester. I am giving him full directions, and he will come to you at every station, and bring you tea or any refreshment you may require. This train takes you straight to Sefton, and Mrs. Willis will meet you, or send for you there. Good-bye, my love ; try to be a good girl, and curb your wild spirits. I hope to see you very much improved when you come home at Midsummer. Good-bye, dear, good-bye. Ah, you want to kiss me —well, just one kiss. There—oh, my dear ! you know I have a great dislike to emotion in public."

Sir John Thornton said this because a pair of arms had been flung suddenly round his neck, and two kisses imprinted passionately on his sallow cheek. A tear also rested on his cheek, but that he wiped away.

CHAPTER II.

TRAVELLING COMPANIONS.

THE train moved rapidly on its way, and the girl in one corner of the railway carriage cried silently behind her crape veil. Her tears were very subdued, but her heart felt sore, bruised, indignant; she hated the idea of school-life before her, she hated the expected restraints and the probable punishments; she fancied herself going from a free life into a prison, and detested it accordingly.

Three months before, Hester Thornton had been one of the happiest, brightest, and merriest of little girls in ——shire; but the mother who was her guardian angel, who had kept the frank and spirited child in check without appearing to do so, who had guided her by the magical power of love and not in the least by that of fear, had met her death suddenly by means of a carriage accident, and Hester and baby Nan were left motherless. Several little brothers and sisters had come between Hester and Nan, but from various causes they had all died in their infancy, and only the eldest and youngest of Sir John Thornton's family remained.

Hester's father was stern, uncompromising. He was a very just and upright man, but he knew nothing of the ways of children, and when Hester in her usual tom-boyish fashion climbed trees and tore her dresses, and rode bare-backed on one or two of his most dangerous horses, he not only tried a little sharp, and therefore useless, correction, but deter-

mined to take immediate steps to have his wild and rather unmanageable little daughter sent to a first-class school. Hester was on her way there now, and very sore was her heart, and indignant her impulses. Father's "good-bye" seemed to her to be the crowning touch to her unhappiness, and she made up her mind not to be good, not to learn her lessons, not to come home at Midsummer crowned with honours and reduced to an every-day and pattern little girl. No, she would be the same wild Hetty as of yore; and when father saw that school could do nothing for her, that it could never make her into a good and ordinary little girl, he would allow her to remain at home. At home there was, at least, Nan to love, and there was mother to remember.

Hetty was a child of the strongest feelings. Since her mother's death she had scarcely mentioned her name. When her father alluded to his wife, Hester ran out of the room; when the servants spoke of their late mistress, Hester turned pale, stamped her feet, and told them to be quiet.

"You are not worthy to speak of my mother," she electrified them all one day by exclaiming. "My mother is an angel now, and you—oh, you are not fit to breathe her name!"

Only to one person would Hetty ever voluntarily say a word about the beloved dead mother, and that was to little Nan. Nan said her prayers, as she expressed it, to Hetty now; and Hetty taught her a little phrase to use instead of the familiar "God bless mother." She taught the child to say, "Thank God for making mother into a beautiful angel;" and when Nan asked what an angel was, and how the cosy mother she remembered could be turned into one,

Hester was beguiled into a soft and tearful talk, and she drew several lovely pictures of white-robed angels, until the little child was satisfied and said—

"Me like that, Hetty—me'll be angel too, Hetty, same as mamma."

These talks with Nan, however, did not come very often, and of late they had almost ceased, for Nan was only two and a half, and the strange sad fact remained that in three months she had almost forgotten her mother.

Hester on her way to school this morning cried for some time, then she sat silent, her crape veil still down, and her eyes watching furtively her fellow-passengers. They consisted of two rather fidgety old ladies, who wrapped themselves in rugs, were very particular on the question of hot bottles, and watched Hester in their turn with considerable curiosity and interest. Presently one of them offered the little girl a sandwich, which she was too proud or too shy to accept, although by this time she was feeling extremely hungry.

"You will, perhaps, prefer a cake, my dear?" said the good-natured little old lady. "My sister Agnes has got some delicious queen-cakes in her basket—will you eat one?"

Hester murmured a feeble assent, and the queen-cake did her so much good that she ventured to raise her crape veil and to look around her.

"Ah, that is much better," said the first little old lady. "Come to this side of the carriage, my love; we are just going to pass through a lovely bit of country, and you will like to watch the view. See; if you place yourself here, my sister Agnes's basket

will be just at your feet, and you can help yourself to a queen-cake whenever you are so disposed."

"Thank you," responded Hester, in a much more cheerful tone, for it was really quite impossible to keep up reserve with such a bright-looking little old lady; "your queen-cakes are very nice, and I liked that one, but one is quite enough, thank you. It is Nan who is so particularly fond of queen-cakes."

"And who is Nan, my dear?" asked the sister to whom the queen-cakes specially belonged.

"She is my dear little baby sister," said Hester in a sorrowful tone.

"Ah, and it was about her you were crying just now," said the first lady, laying her hand on Hester's arm. "Never mind us, dear, we have seen a great many tears—a great many. They are the way of the world. Women are born to them. As Kingsley says —'women must weep.' It was quite natural that you should cry about your sweet little Nan, and I wish we could send her some of these queen-cakes that you say she is so fond of. Are you going to be long away from her, love?"

"Oh, yes, for months and months," said Hester. "I did not know," she added, "that it was such a common thing to cry. I never used to."

"Ah, you have had other trouble, poor child," glancing at her deep mourning frock.

"Yes, it is since then I have cried so often. Please, I would rather not speak about it."

"Quite right, my love, quite right," said Miss Agnes in a much brisker tone than her sister. "We will turn the conversation now to something inspiriting. Jane is quite right, there are plenty of tears in the world; but there is also a great deal of

sunshine and heaps of laughter, merry laughter—the laughter of youth, my child. Now, I dare say, though you have begun your journey so sadly, that you are really bound on quite a pleasant little expedition. For instance, you are going to visit a kind aunt, or some one else who will give you a delightful welcome."

"No," said Hester, "I am not. I am going to a dreadful place, and the thought of that, and parting from little Nan, are the reasons why I cried. I am going to prison—I am, indeed."

"Oh, my dear love!" exclaimed both the little old ladies in a breath. Then Miss Agnes continued: "You have really taken Jane's breath away—quite. Yes, Jane, I see that you are in for an attack of palpitation. Never mind her, dear, she palpitates very easily; but I think you must be mistaken, my love, in mentioning such an appalling word as 'prison.' Yes, now I come to think of it, it is absolutely certain that you must be mistaken; for if you were going to such a terrible place of punishment you would be under the charge of a policeman. You are given to strong language, dear, like other young folk."

"Well, I call it prison," continued Hester, who was rather flattered by all this bustle and Miss Jane's agitation; "it has a dreadful sound, hasn't it? I call it prison, but father says I am going to school—you can't wonder that I am crying, can you? Oh! what is the matter?"

For the two little old ladies jumped up at this juncture, and gave Hetty a kiss apiece on her soft young lips.

"My darling," they both exclaimed, "we are so relieved and delighted! your strong language startled us, and school is anything but what you imagine, dear.

Ah, Jane! can you ever forget our happy days at school?"

Miss Jane sighed and rolled up her eyes, and then the two commenced a vigorous catechising of the little girl. Really Hester could not help feeling almost sunshiny before that long journey came to an end, for she and the Misses Bruce made some delightful discoveries. The little old ladies very quickly found out that they lived close to the school where Hetty was to spend the next few months. They knew Mrs. Willis well—they knew the delightful rambling, old-fashioned house where Hester was to live—they even knew two or three of the scholars; and they said so often to the little girl that she was going into a life of clover—positive clover—that she began to smile, and even partly to believe them.

"I am glad I shall be near you, at least," she said at last, with a frank sweet smile, for she had greatly taken to her kind fellow-travellers.

"Yes, my dear," exclaimed Miss Jane. "We attend the same church, and I shall look out for you on Sunday, and," she continued, glancing first at her sister and then addressing Hester, "perhaps Mrs. Willis will allow you to visit us occasionally."

"I'll come to-morrow, if you like," said Hester.

"Well, dear, well—that must be as Mrs. Willis thinks best. Ah, here we are at Sefton at last. We shall look out for you in church on Sunday, my love."

CHAPTER III.

AT LAVENDER HOUSE.

HESTER'S journey had really proved wonderfully agreeable. She had taken a great fancy to the little old ladies who had fussed over her and made themselves pleasant in her behalf. She felt herself something like a heroine as she poured out a little, just a little, of her troubles into their sympathising ears; and their cheerful remarks with regard to school and school-life had caused her to see clearly that there might be another and a brighter side to the gloomy picture she had drawn with regard to her future.

But during the drive of two and a half miles from Sefton to Lavender House, Hester once more began to feel anxious and troubled. The Misses Bruce had gone off with some other passengers in a little omnibus to their small villa in the town, but Lavender House was some distance off, and the little omnibus never went so far.

An old-fashioned carriage, which the ladies told Hester belonged to Mrs. Willis, had been sent to meet her, and a man whom the Misses Bruce addressed as "Thomas" helped to place her trunk and a small portmanteau on the roof of the vehicle. The little girl had to take her drive alone, and the rather ancient horse which drew the old carriage climbed up and down the steep roads in a most leisurely fashion. It was a cold winter's day, and by the time Thomas had executed some commissions in Sefton, and had reached the gates of the avenue which led to Lavender House,

it was very nearly dark. Hester trembled at the darkness, and when the gates were shut behind them by a rosy-faced urchin of ten, she once more began to feel the cruel and desolate idea that she was going to prison.

They drove slowly down a long and winding avenue, and, although Hester could not see, she knew they must be passing under trees, for several times their branches made a noise against the roof of the carriage. At last they came to a standstill. The old servant scrambled slowly down from his seat on the box, and, opening the carriage-door, held out his hand to help the little stranger to alight.

"Come now, missy," he said in cheering tones, "come out, and you'll be warm and snug in a minute. Dear, dear! I expect you're nearly froze up, poor little miss, and it *is* a most bitter cold night."

He rang a bell which hung by the entrance of a deep porch, and the next moment the wide hall-door was flung open by a neat maid-servant, and Hester stepped within.

"She's come," exclaimed several voices in different keys, and proceeding apparently from different quarters. Hester looked around her in a half-startled way, but she could see no one, except the maid, who smiled at her and said—

"Welcome to Lavender House, miss. If you'll step into the porter's room for one moment, there is a good fire there, and I'll acquaint Miss Danesbury that you have arrived."

The little room in question was at the right-hand side of a very wide and cheerful hall, which was decorated in pale tints of green, and had a handsome encaustic-tiled floor. A blazing fire and two lamps

made the hall look cheerful, but Hester was very glad to take refuge from the unknown voices in the porter's small room. She found herself quite trembling with shyness, and cold, and an indescribable longing to get back to Nan; and as she waited for Miss Danesbury and wondered fearfully who or what Miss Danesbury was, she scarcely derived any comfort from the blazing fire near which she stood.

"Rather tall for her age, but I fear, I greatly fear, a little sulky," said a voice behind her; and when she turned round in an agony of trepidation and terror, she suddenly found herself face to face with a tall, kind-looking, middle-aged lady, and also with a bright gipsy-looking girl.

"Annie Forest, how very naughty of you to hide behind the door! You are guilty of disobedience in coming into this room without leave. I must report you, my dear; yes, I really must. You lose two good conduct marks for this, and will probably have thirty lines in addition to your usual quantity of French poetry."

"But she won't tell on me, she won't, dear old Danesbury," said the girl; "she couldn't be so hard-hearted, the precious love, particularly as curiosity happens to be one of her own special little virtues! Take a kiss, Danesbury, and now, as you love me you'll be merciful!" The girl flitted away, and Miss Danesbury turned to Hester, whose face had changed from red to pale during this little scene.

"What a horrid, vulgar, low-bred girl!" she exclaimed with passion, for in all the experiences of her short life Hester had never even imagined that personal remarks could be made of any one in their very presence. "I hope she'll get a lot of punishment

—I hope you are not going to forgive her," she continued, for her anger had for the time quite overcome her shyness.

"Oh, my dear, my dear! we should all be forgiving," exclaimed Miss Danesbury in her gentle voice. "Welcome to Lavender House, love; I am sorry I was not in the hall to receive you. Had I been, this little *rencontre* would not have occurred. Annie Forest meant no harm, however—she's a wild little sprite, but affectionate. You and she will be the best friends possible by-and-by. Now, let me take you to your room; the gong for tea will sound in exactly five minutes, and I am sure you will be glad of something to eat."

Miss Danesbury then led Hester across the hall and up some broad, low, thickly-carpeted stairs. When they had ascended two flights, and were standing on a handsome landing, she paused.

"Do you see this baize door, dear?" she said. "This is the entrance to the school part of the house. This part that we are now in belongs exclusively to Mrs. Willis, and the girls are never allowed to come here without leave. All the school life is lived at the other side of this baize door, and a very happy life I assure you it is for those little girls who make up their minds to be brave and good. Now kiss me, my dear, and let me bid you welcome once again to Lavender House."

"Are you our principal teacher, then?" asked Hester.

"I? oh dear, no, my love. I teach the younger children English, and I look after the interests and comforts of all. I am a very useful sort of person, I believe, and I have a motherly heart, dear, and it is

a way with little girls to come to me when they are in trouble. Now, my love, we must not chatter any longer. Take my hand, and let us get to your room as fast as possible."

Miss Danesbury pushed open the baize door, and instantly Hester found herself in a different region. Mrs. Willis's part of the house gave the impression of warmth, luxuriance, and even elegance of arrangement. At the other side of the door were long, narrow corridors, with snow-white, but carpetless floors, and rather cold, distempered walls. Miss Danesbury, holding the new pupil's hand, led her down two corridors, and past a great number of shut doors, behind which Hester could hear suppressed laughter and eager, chattering voices. At last, however, they stopped at a door which had the number "32" written over it.

"This is your bedroom, dear," said the English teacher, "and to-night you will not be sorry to have it alone. Mrs. Willis received a telegram from Susan Drummond, your room-mate, this afternoon, and she will not arrive until to-morrow."

However bare and even cold the corridors looked, the bedroom into which Hester was ushered by no means corresponded with this appearance. It was a small, but daintily-furnished little room. The floor was carpeted with green felt, the one window was hung with pretty draperies, and two little, narrow, white beds were arranged gracefully with French canopies. All the furniture in the room was of a minute description, but good of its kind. Beside each bed stood a mahogany chest of drawers. At two corresponding corners were marble washhand-stands, and even two pretty toilet tables stood side by side

in the recess of the window. But the sight that perhaps pleased Hester most was a small bright fire which burnt in the grate.

"Now, dear, this is your room. As you have arrived first you can choose your own bed and your own chest of drawers. Ah, that is right, Ellen has unfastened your portmanteau; she will unpack your trunk to-night, and take it to the box-room. Now, dear, smooth your hair and wash your hands. The gong will sound instantly. I will come for you when it does."

CHAPTER IV.

LITTLE DRAWING-ROOMS AND LITTLE TIFFS.

MISS DANESBURY, true to her word, came to fetch Hester down to tea. They went down some broad carpetless stairs, along a wide stone hall, and then paused for an instant at a half-open door from which a stream of eager voices issued.

"I will introduce you to your school-fellows, and I hope your future friends," said Miss Danesbury. "After tea you will come with me to see Mrs. Willis—she is never in the school-room at tea-time. Mdlle. Perier or Miss Good usually superintends. Now, my dear, come along—why, surely you are not frightened?"

"Oh, please, may I sit near you?" asked Hester.

"No, my love; I take care of the little ones, and they are at a table by themselves. Now, come in at once—the moment you dread will soon be over, and it is nothing, my love—really nothing."

Nothing! never, as long as Hester lived, did she forget the supreme agony of terror and shyness which came over her as she entered that long, low, brightly-lighted room. The forty pairs of curious eyes which were raised inquisitively to her face became as torturing as forty burning suns. She felt an almost uncontrollable desire to run away and hide—she wondered if she could possibly keep from screaming aloud. In the end she found herself, she scarcely knew how, seated beside a gentle, sweet-mannered girl, and munching bread and butter which tasted drier than sawdust, and occasionally trying to sip something very hot and scalding which she vaguely understood went by the name of tea. The buzzing voices all chattering eagerly in French, and the occasional sharp, high-pitched reprimands coming in peremptory tones from the thin lips of Mdlle. Perier, sounded far off and distant—her head was dizzy, her eyes swam—the tired and shy child endured tortures.

In after-days, in long after-years when the memory of Lavender House was to come back to Hetty Thornton as one of the sweetest, brightest episodes in her existence—in the days when she was to know almost every blade of grass in the gardens, and to be familiar with each corner of the old house, with each face which now appeared so strange, she might wonder at her feelings to-night, but never even then could she forget them.

She sat at the table in a dream, trying to eat the tasteless bread and butter. Suddenly and swiftly the thick and somewhat stale piece of bread on her plate was exchanged for a thin, fresh, and delicately-cut slice.

"Eat that," whispered a voice—"I know the other is horrid. It's a shame of Perier to give such stuff to a stranger."

"Mdlle. Cécile, you are transgressing: you are talking English," came in a torrent of rapid French from the head of the table. "You lose a conduct mark, ma'amselle."

The young girl who sat next Hester inclined her head gently and submissively, and Hester, venturing to glance at her, saw that a delicate pink had spread itself over her pale face. She was a plain girl; but even Hester, in this first moment of terror, could scarcely have been afraid of her, so benign was her expression, so sweet the glance from her soft, full brown eyes. Hester now further observed that the thin bread and butter had been removed from Cecil's own plate. She began to wonder why this girl was indulged with better food than the rest of her comrades.

Hester was beginning to feel a little less shy, and was taking one or two furtive glances at her companions, when she suddenly felt herself turning crimson, and all her agony of shyness and dislike to her school-life returning. She encountered the full, bright, quizzical gaze of the girl who had made personal remarks about her in the porter's room. The merry black eyes of this gipsy maiden fairly twinkled with suppressed fun when they met hers, and the bright head even nodded audaciously across the table to her.

Not for worlds would Hester return this friendly greeting—she still held to her opinion that Miss Forest was one of the most ill-bred people she had ever met, and, in addition to feeling a con-

siderable amount of fear of her, she quite made up her mind that she would never be on friendly terms with so underbred a girl.

At this moment grace was repeated in sonorous tones by a stern-looking person who sat at the foot of the long table, and whom Hester had not before noticed. Instantly the girls rose from their seats, and began to file in orderly procession out of the tea-room. Hester looked round in terror for the friendly Miss Danesbury, but she could not catch sight of her anywhere. At this moment, however, her companion of the tea-table touched her arm.

"We may speak English now for half an hour," she said, "and most of us are going to the play-room. We generally tell stories round the fire upon these dark winter's nights. Would you like to come with me to-night? Shall we be chums for this evening?"

"I don't know what 'chums' are," said Hester; "but," she added, with the dawning of a faint smile on her poor, sad little face, "I shall be very glad to go with you."

"Come then," said Cecil Temple, and she pulled Hester's hand within her arm, and walked with her across the wide stone hall, and into the largest room Hester had ever seen.

Never, anywhere, could there have been a more delightful playroom than this. It was so large that two great fires which burned at either end were not at all too much to emit even tolerable warmth. The room was bright with three or four lamps which were suspended from the ceiling, the floor was covered with matting, and the walls were divided into curious partitions, which gave the room a peculiar but very cosy

effect. These partitions consisted of large panels, and were divided by slender rails the one from the other.

"This is my cosy corner," said Cecil, "and you shall sit with me in it to-night. You see," she added, "each of us girls has her own partition, and we can do exactly what we like in it. We can put our own photographs, our own drawings, our own treasures on our panels. Under each division is our own little work-table, and, in fact, our own individual treasures lie round us in the enclosure of this dear little rail. The centre of the room is common property, and you see what a great space there is round each fire-place where we can chatter and talk, and be on common ground. The fire-place at the end of the room near the door is reserved especially for the little ones, but we elder girls sit at the top. Of course you will belong to us. How old are you?"

"Twelve," said Hester.

"Oh, well, you are so tall that you cannot possibly be put with the little ones, so you must come in with us."

"And shall I have a railed-in division and a panel of my own?" asked Hester. "It sounds a very nice arrangement. I hope my department will be close to yours, Miss——?"

"Temple is my name," said Cecil, "but you need not call me that. I am Cecil to all my friends, and you are my friend this evening, for you are my chum, you know. Oh, you were asking me about our departments—you won't have any at first, for you have got to earn it, but I will invite you to mine pretty often. Come now, let us go inside. Is not it just like the darlingest little drawing-room? I am so

sorry that I have only one easy chair, but you shall have it to-night, and I will sit on this three-legged stool. I am saving up my money to buy another arm-chair, and Annie has promised to upholster it for me."

"Is Annie one of the maids?"

"Oh, dear, no!—she's dear old Annie Forest, the liveliest girl in the school. Poor darling, she's seldom out of hot water; but we all love her, we can't help it. Poor Annie, she hardly ever has the luxury of a department to herself, so she is useful all round. She's the most amusing and good-natured dear pet in Christendom."

"I don't like her at all," said Hester; "I did not know you were talking of her—she is a most rude, uncouth girl."

Cecil Temple, who had been arranging a small dark green table-cloth with daffodils worked artistically in each corner on her little table, stood up as the newcomer uttered these words, and regarded her fixedly.

"It is a pity to draw hasty conclusions," she said. "There is no girl more loved in the school than Annie Forest. Even the teachers, although they are always punishing her, cannot help having a soft corner in their hearts for her. What can she possibly have done to offend you?—but oh!—hush—don't speak—she is coming into the room."

As Cecil finished her rather eager defence of her friend, and prevented the indignant words which were bubbling to Hester's lips, a gay voice was heard singing a comic song in the passage—the play-room door was flung open with a bang, and Miss Forest entered the room with a small girl seated on each of her shoulders.

"Hold on, Janny love; keep your arms well round me, Mabel. Now then, here we go—twice up the room and down again. No more, as I'm alive. I've got to attend to other matters than you."

She placed the little girls on the floor amid peals of laughter, and shouts from several little ones to give them a ride too. The children began to cling to her skirts and to drag her in all directions, and she finally escaped from them with one dexterous bound which placed her in that portion of the playroom where the little ones knew they were not allowed to enter.

Until her arrival the different girls scattered about the large room had been more or less orderly, chattering and laughing together, it is true, but in a quiet manner. Now the whole place appeared suddenly in an uproar.

"Annie, come here—Annie, darling, give me your opinion about this—Annie, my precious, naughty creature, come and tell me about your last scrape."

Annie Forest blew several kisses to her adorers, but did not attach herself to any of them.

"The Temple requires me," she said, in her sauciest tones; "my beloved friends, the Temple as usual is vouchsafing its sacred shelter to the stranger."

In an instant Annie was kneeling inside the enclosure of Miss Temple's rail and laughing immoderately.

"You dear stranger!" she exclaimed, turning round and gazing full into Hester's shy face, "I do declare I have been punished for the intense ardour with which I longed to embrace you. Has she told you, Cecil darling, what I did in her behalf? How I ventured beyond the sacred precincts of the baize door and hid inside the porter's room? Poor dear, she

"'SHAKE HANDS, NOW, AND LET US MAKE FRIENDS'" (*p.* 29).

jumped when she heard my friendly voice, and as I spoke Miss Danesbury caught me in the very act. Poor old dear, she cried when she complained of me, but duty is Danesbury's motto; she would go to the stake for it, and I respect her immensely. I have got my twenty lines of that horrible French poetry to learn—the very thought almost strangles me, and I foresee plainly that I shall do something terribly naughty within the next few hours; I must, my love—I really must. I have just come here to shake hands with Miss Thornton, and then I must away to my penance. Ah, how little I shall learn, and how hard I shall think! Welcome to Lavender House, Miss Thornton; look upon me as your devoted ally, and if you have a spark of pity in your breast, feel for the girl whom you got into a scrape the very moment you entered these sacred walls."

"I don't understand you," said Hester, who would not hold out her hand, and who was standing up in a very stiff, shy, and angular position. "I think you were very rude to startle me, and make personal remarks the very moment I came into the house."

"Oh, dear!—I only said you were tall, and looked rather sulky, love—you did, you know, really."

"It was very rude of you," repeated Hester, turning crimson, and trying to keep back her tears.

"Well, my dear, I meant no harm; shake hands, now, and let us make friends."

But Hester felt either too shy or too miserable to yield to this request—she half turned her back, and leaned against Miss Temple's panel.

"Never mind her," whispered gentle Cecil Temple; but Annie Forest's bright face had darkened ominously—the school favourite was not accustomed to having

her advances flung back in her face. She left the room singing a defiant, naughty song, and several of the girls who had overheard this scene whispered one to the other—

"She can't be at all nice—she would not even shake hands with Annie. Fancy her turning against our Annie in that way!"

CHAPTER V.

THE HEAD-MISTRESS.

ANNIE FOREST had scarcely left the room before Miss Danesbury appeared with a message for Hester, who was to come with her directly to see Mrs. Willis. The poor shy girl felt only too glad to leave behind her the cruel, staring, and now by no means approving eyes of her school-mates. She had overheard several of their whispers, and felt rather alarmed at her own act. But Hester, shy as she was, could be very tenacious of an idea. She had taken a dislike to Annie Forest, and she was quite determined to be true to what she considered her convictions—namely, that Annie was underbred and common, and not at all the kind of girl whom her mother would have cared for her to know. The little girl followed Miss Danesbury in silence. They crossed the stone hall together, and now passing through another baize door, found themselves once more in the handsome entrance-hall. They walked across this hall to a door carefully protected from all draughts by rich plush curtains, and Miss Danesbury, turning the handle, and going a step or two into the room, said in her gentle voice—

"I have brought Hester Thornton to see you, Mrs. Willis, according to your wish."

Miss Danesbury then withdrew, and Hester ventured to raise her eyes and to look timidly at the head-mistress.

A tall woman, with a beautiful face and silvery white hair, came instantly to meet her, laid her two hands on the girl's shoulders, and then, raising her shy little face, imprinted a kiss on her forehead.

"Your mother was one of my earliest pupils, Hester," she said, "and you are—no—" after a pause, "you are not very like her. You are her child, however, my dear, and as such you have a warm welcome from me. Now, come and sit by the fire, and let us talk."

Hester did not feel nearly so constrained with this graceful and gracious lady as she had done with her school-mates. The atmosphere of the room recalled her beloved mother's boudoir at home. The rich, dove-coloured satin dress, the cap made of Mechlin lace which softened and shaded Mrs. Willis's silvery hair, appeared homelike to the little girl, who had grown up accustomed to all the luxuries of wealth. Above all, the head-mistress's mention of her mother drew her heart towards the beautiful face, and attracted her towards the rich, full tones of a voice which could be powerful and commanding at will. Mrs. Willis, notwithstanding her white hair, had a youthful face, and Hester made the comment which came first to her lips—

"I did not think you were old enough to have taught my mother."

"I am sixty, dear, and I have kept this school for thirty years. Your mother was not the only pupil

who sent her children to be taught by me when the time came. Now, you can sit on this stool by the fire and tell me about your home. Your mother—ah, poor child, you would rather not talk about her just yet. Helen's daughter must have strong feelings—ah, yes; I see, I see. Another time, darling, when you know me better. Now tell me about your little sister, and your father. You do not know, perhaps, that I am Nan's godmother?"

After this the head-mistress and the new pupil had a long conversation. Hester forgot her shyness; her whole heart had gone out instantly to this beautiful woman who had known, and loved, and taught her mother.

"I will try to be good at school," she said at last; "but, oh, please, Mrs. Willis, it does not seem to me to-night as if school-life could be happy."

"It has its trials, Hester; but the brave and the noble girls often find this time of discipline one of the best in their lives—good at the time, very good to look back on by-and-by. You will find a miniature world around you; you will be surrounded by temptations; and you will have rare chances of proving whether your character can be strong and great and true. I think, as a rule, my girls are happy, and as a rule they turn out well. The great motto of life here, Hester, is earnestness. We are earnest in our work, we are earnest in our play. A half-hearted girl has no chance at Lavender House. In play-time, laugh with the merriest, my child; in school-hours, study with the most studious. Do you understand me?"

"I try to, a little," said Hester, "but it seems all very strange just now."

"No doubt it does, and at first you will have to encounter many perplexities and to fight many battles. Never mind, if you have the right spirit within you, you will come out on the winning side. Now, tell me, have you made any acquaintances as yet amongst the girls?"

"Yes—Cecil Temple has been kind to me."

"Cecil is one of my dearest pupils; cultivate her friendship, Hester—she is honourable, she is sympathising. I am not afraid to say that Cecil has a great heart."

"There is another girl," continued Hester, "who has spoken to me. I need not make her my friend, need I?"

"Who is she, dear?"

"Miss Forest—I don't like her."

"What! our school favourite. You will change your mind, I expect—but that is the gong for prayers. You shall come with me to chapel, to-night, and I will introduce vou to Mr. Everard."

CHAPTER VI.

"I AM UNHAPPY."

BETWEEN forty and fifty young girls assembled night and morning for prayers in the pretty chapel which adjoined Lavender House. This chapel had been reconstructed from the ruins of an ancient priory, on the site of which the house was built. The walls, and even the beautiful eastern window, belonged to a far-off date. The roof had been carefully reared in accordance with the style of the east window, and

the whole effect was beautiful and impressive. Mrs. Willis was particularly fond of her own chapel. Here she hoped the girls' best lessons might be learnt, and here she had even once or twice brought a refractory pupil, and tried what a gentle word or two spoken in these old and sacred walls might effect. Here, on wet Sundays the girls assembled for service; and here, every evening at nine o'clock, came the vicar of the large parish to which Lavender House belonged, to conduct evening prayers. He was an old man, and a great friend of Mrs. Willis's, and he often told her that he considered these young girls some of the most important members of his flock.

Here Hester knelt to-night. It is to be doubted whether in her confusion, and in the strange loneliness which even Mrs. Willis had scarcely removed, she prayed much. It is certain she did not join in the evening hymn, which, with the aid of an organ and some sweet girl-voices, was beautifully and almost pathetically rendered. After evening prayers had come to an end, Mrs. Willis took Hester's hand and led her up to the old, white-headed vicar.

"This is my new pupil, Mr. Everard, or rather I should say, our new pupil. Her education depends as much on you as on me."

The vicar held out his hands, and took Hester's within them, and then drew her forward to the light.

"This little face does not seem quite strange to me," he said. "Have I ever seen you before, my dear?"

"No, sir," replied Hester.

"You have seen her mother," said Mrs. Willis —"Do you remember your favourite pupil, Helen Anstey, of long ago?"

"Ah! indeed—indeed! I shall never forget Helen. And are you her child, little one?"

But Hester's face had grown white. The solemn service in the chapel, joined to all the excitement and anxieties of the day, had strung up her sensitive nerves to a pitch higher than she could endure. Suddenly, as the vicar spoke to her, and Mrs. Willis looked kindly down at her new pupil, the chapel seemed to reel round, the pupils one by one disappeared, and the tired girl only saved herself from fainting by a sudden burst of tears.

"Oh, I am unhappy," she sobbed, "without my mother! Please, please, don't talk to me about my mother."

She could scarcely take in the gentle words which her two friends said to her, and she hardly noticed when Mrs. Willis did such a wonderful thing as to stoop down and kiss a second time the lips of a new pupil.

Finally she found herself consigned to Miss Danesbury's care, who hurried her off to her room, and helped her to undress and tucked her into her little bed.

"Now, love, you shall have some hot gruel. No, not a word. You ate little or no tea, to-night—I watched you from my distant table. Half your loneliness is caused by want of food—I know it, my love; I am a very practical person. Now, eat your gruel, and then shut your eyes and go to sleep."

"You are very kind to me," said Hester, "and so is Mrs. Willis, and so is Mr. Everard, and I like Cecil Temple—but, oh, I wish Annie Forest was not in the school!"

"Hush, my dear, I implore of you. You pain me by these words. I am quite confident that Annie will be your best friend yet."

Hester's lips said nothing, but her eyes answered "Never" as plainly as eyes could speak.

CHAPTER VII.

A DAY AT SCHOOL.

If Hester Thornton went to sleep that night under a sort of dreamy, hazy impression that school was a place without a great deal of order, with many kind and sympathising faces, and with some not so agreeable; if she went to sleep under the impression that she had dropped into a sort of medley, that she had found herself in a vast new world where certain personages exercised undoubtedly a strong moral influence, but where on the whole a number of other people did pretty much what they pleased—she awoke in the morning to find her preconceived ideas scattered to the four winds.

There was nothing of apparent liberty about the Lavender House arrangements in the early morning hours. In the first place, it seemed quite the middle of the night when Hester was awakened by a loud gong, which clanged through the house and caused her to sit up in bed in a considerable state of fright and perplexity. A moment or two later a neatly-dressed maid-servant came into the room with a can of hot water; she lit a pair of candles on the mantelpiece, and, with the remark that the second gong would sound in half an hour, and that all the young

ladies would be expected to assemble in the chapel at seven o'clock precisely, she left the room.

Hester pulled her pretty little gold watch from under her pillow, and saw with a sigh that it was now half-past six.

"What odious hours they keep in this horrid place!" she said to herself. "Well, well, I always did know that school would be unendurable."

She waited for five minutes before she got up, and then she dressed herself languidly, and, if the truth must be told, in a very untidy fashion. She managed to be dressed by the time the second gong sounded, but she had only one moment to give to her private prayers. She reflected, however, that this did not greatly matter as she was going down to prayers immediately in the chapel.

The service in the chapel the night before had impressed her more deeply than she cared to own, and she followed her companions downstairs with a certain feeling of pleasure at the thought of again seeing Mr. Everard and Mrs. Willis. She wondered if they would take much notice of her this morning, and she thought it just possible that Mr. Everard, who had looked at her so compassionately the night before, might be induced, for the sake of his old friendship with her mother, to take her home with him to spend the day. She thought she would rather like to spend a day with Mr. Everard, and she fancied he was the sort of person who would influence her and help her to be good. Hester fancied that if some very interesting and quite out of the common person took her in hand, she might be formed into something extremely noble—noble enough even to forgive Annie Forest.

The girls all filed into the chapel, which was lighted as brightly and cheerily as the night before; but Hester found herself placed on a bench far down in the building. She was no longer in the place of honour by Mrs. Willis's side. She was one of a number, and no one looked particularly at her or noticed her in any way. A shy young curate read the morning prayers; Mr. Everard was not present, and Mrs. Willis, who was, walked out of the chapel when prayers were over without even glancing in Hester's direction. This was bad enough for the poor little dreamer of dreams, but worse was to follow.

Mrs. Willis did not speak to Hester, but she did stop for an instant beside Annie Forest. Hester saw her lay her white hand on the young girl's shoulder and whisper for an instant in her ear. Annie's lovely gipsy face flushed a vivid crimson.

"For your sake, darling," she whispered back; but Hester caught the words, and was consumed by a fierce jealousy.

The girls went into the school-room, where Mdlle. Perier gave a French lesson to the upper class. Hester belonged to no class at present, and could look around her, and have plenty of time to reflect on her own miseries, and particularly on what she now considered the favouritism shown by Mrs. Willis.

"Mr. Everard at least will read through that girl," she said to herself; "he could not possibly endure any one so loud. Yes, I am sure that my only friend at home, Cecilia Day, would call Annie very loud. I wonder Mrs. Willis can endure her. Mrs. Willis seems so ladylike herself, but——Oh, I beg your pardon, what's the matter?"

A very sharp voice had addressed itself to the idle Hester.

"But, mademoiselle, you are doing nothing! This cannot for a moment be permitted. Pardonnez-moi, you know not the French? Here is a little easy lesson. Study, it mademoiselle, and don't let your eyes wander a moment from the page."

Hester favoured Mdlle. Perier with a look of lofty contempt, but she received the well-thumbed lesson-book in absolute silence.

At eight o'clock came breakfast, which was nicely served, and was very good and abundant. Hester was thoroughly hungry this morning, and did not feel so shy as the night before. She found herself seated between two strange girls, who talked to her a little and would have made themselves friendly had she at all encouraged them to do so. After breakfast came half an hour's recreation, when, the weather being very bad, the girls again assembled in the cosy play-room. Hester looked round eagerly for Cecil Temple, who greeted her with a kind smile, but did not ask her into her enclosure. Annie Forest was not present, and Hester breathed a sigh of relief at her absence. The half-hour devoted to recreation proved rather dull to the new-comer. Hester could not understand her present world. To the girl who had been brought up practically as an only child in the warm shelter of a home, the ways and doings of school-girl life were an absolute enigma.

Hester had no idea of unbending or of making herself agreeable. The girls voted her to one another stiff and tiresome, and quickly left her to her own devices. She looked longingly at Cecil Temple; but Cecil, who could never be knowingly unkind to any

one, was seizing the precious moments to write a letter to her father, and Hester presently wandered down the room and tried to take an interest in the little ones. From twelve to fifteen quite little children were in the school, and Hester wondered with a sort of vague half-pain if she might see any child amongst the group the least like Nan.

"They will like to have me with them," she said to herself. "Poor little dots, they always like big girls to notice them, and didn't they make a fuss about Miss Forest last night! Well, Nan is fond enough of me, and little children find out so quickly what one is really like."

Hester walked boldly into the group. The little dots were all as busy as bees, were not the least lonely, or the least shy, and very plainly gave the intruder to understand that they would prefer her room to her company. Hester was not proud with little children—she loved them dearly. Some of the smaller ones in question were beautiful little creatures, and her heart warmed to them for Nan's sake. She could not stoop to conciliate the older girls, but she could make an effort with the babies. She knelt on the floor and took up a headless doll.

"I know a little girl who had a doll like that," she said. Here she paused and several pairs of eyes were fixed on her.

"Poor dolly's b'oke," said the owner of the headless one in a tone of deep commiseration.

"You *are* such a breaker, you know, Annie," said Annie's little five-year-old sister.

"Please tell us about the little girl what had the doll wifout the head," she proceeded, glancing at Hester.

"Oh, it was taken to a hospital, and got back its head," said Hester quite cheerfully; "it became quite well again, and was a more beautiful doll than ever."

This announcement caused intense wonder and was certainly carrying the interest of all the little ones. Hester was deciding that the child who possessed the headless doll *had* a look of Nan about her dark brown eyes, when suddenly there was a diversion—the play-room door was opened noisily, banged-to with a very loud report, and a gay voice sang out—

"The fairy queen has just paid me a visit. Who wants sweeties from the fairy queen?"

Instantly all the little feet had scrambled to the perpendicular, each pair of hands was clapped noisily, each little throat shouted a joyful—

"Here comes Annie!"

Annie Forest was surrounded, and Hester knelt alone on the hearth-rug.

She felt herself colouring painfully—she did not fail to observe that two laughing eyes had fixed themselves with a momentary triumph on her face; then, snatching up a book, which happened to lie close, she seated herself with her back to all the girls, and her head bent over the page. It is quite doubtful whether she saw any of the words, but she was at least determined not to cry.

The half-hour so wearisome to poor Hester came to an end, and the girls, conducted by Miss Danesbury, filed into the school-room and took their places in the different classes.

Work had now begun in serious earnest. The school-room presented an animated and busy scene. The young faces with their varying expressions

betokened on the whole the preponderance of an earnest spirit. Discipline, not too severe, reigned triumphant.

Hester was not yet appointed to any place amongst these busy workers, but while she stood wondering, a little confused, and half intending to drop into an empty seat which happened to be close, Miss Danesbury came up to her.

"Follow me, Miss Thornton," she said, and she conducted the young girl up the whole length of the great school-room, and pushed aside some baize curtains which concealed a second smaller room, where Mrs. Willis sat before a desk.

The head-mistress was no longer dressed in soft pearl-grey and Mechlin lace. She wore a black silk dress, and her white cap seemed to Hester to add a severe tone to her features. She neither shook hands with the new pupil nor kissed her, but said instantly in a bright though authoritative tone—

"I must now find out as quickly as possible what you know, Hester, in order to place you in the most suitable class."

Hester was a clever girl, and passed through the ordeal of a rather stiff examination with considerable ability. Mrs. Willis prononounced her English and general information quite up to the usual standard for girls of her age—her French was deficient, but she showed some talent for German.

"On the whole I am pleased with your general intelligence, and I think you have good capacities, Hester," she said in conclusion. "I shall ask Miss Good, our very accomplished English teacher, to place you in the third class. You will have to work

very hard, however, at your French, to maintain your place there. But Mdlle. Perier is kind and painstaking, and it rests with yourself to quickly acquire a conversational acquaintance with the language. You are aware that, except during recreation, you are never allowed to speak in any other tongue. Now, go back to the school-room, my dear."

As Mrs. Willis spoke she laid her finger on a little silver gong which stood by her side.

"One moment, please," said Hester, colouring crimson, "I want to ask you a question, please."

"Is it about your lessons?"

"No—oh, no; it is——"

"Then pardon me, my dear," uttered the governess, "I sit in my room every evening from eight to half-past, and I am then at liberty to see a pupil on any subject which is not trifling. Nothing but lessons are spoken of in lesson hours, Hester. Ah, here comes Miss Good. Miss Good, I should wish you to place Hester Thornton in the third class. Her English is up to the average. I will see Mdlle. Perier about her at twelve o'clock."

Hester followed the English teacher into the great school-room, took her place in the third class, at the desk which was pointed out to her, was given a pile of new books, and was asked to attend to the history lesson which was then going on.

Notwithstanding her confusion, a certain sense of soreness, and some indignation at what she considered Mrs. Willis's altered manner, she acquitted herself with considerable spirit, and was pleased to see that her class companions regarded her with some respect.

An English literature lecture followed the history,

and here again Hester acquitted herself with *éclat.* The subject to-day was "Julius Cæsar," and Hester had read Shakespeare's play over many times with her mother.

But when the hour came for foreign languages, her brief triumph ceased. Lower and lower did she fall in her school-fellows' estimation, as she stumbled through her truly English-French. Mdlle. Perier, who was a very fiery little woman, almost screamed at her—the girls coloured and nearly tittered. Hester hoped to recover her lost laurels in German, but by this time her head ached, and she did very little better in the German which she loved than in the French which she detested. At twelve o'clock she was relieved to find that school was over for the present, and she heard the English teacher's voice desiring the girls to go quickly to their rooms, and to assemble in five minutes' time in the great stone hall, equipped for their walk.

The walk lasted for a little over an hour, and was a very dreary penance to poor Hester, as she was neither allowed to run, race, nor talk a word of English. She sighed heavily once or twice, and several of the girls who looked at her curiously agreed with Annie Forest that she was decidedly sulky. The walk was followed by dinner; then came half an hour of recreation in the delightful play-room, and eager chattering in the English tongue.

At three o'clock the school assembled once more; but now the studies were of a less severe character, and Hester spent one of her first happy half-hours over a drawing lesson. She had a great love for drawing, and felt some pride in the really beautiful copy which she was making of the stump of an old

gnarled oak-tree. Her dismay, however, was proportionately great when the drawing-master drew his pencil right across her copy.

"I particularly requested you not to sketch in any of the shadows, Miss Thornton. Did you not hear me say that my lesson to-day was in outline? I gave you a shaded piece to copy in outline—did you not understand?"

"This is my first day at school," whispered back poor Hester, speaking in English in her distress. Whereupon the master smiled, and even forgot to report her for her transgression of the French tongue.

Hester spent the rest of that afternoon over her music lesson. The music-master was an irascible little German, but Hester played with some taste, and was therefore not too severely rapped over the knuckles.

Then came tea and another half-hour of recreation, which was followed by two silent hours in the school-room, each girl bent busily over her books in preparation for the next day's work. Hester studied hard, for she had made up her mind to be the intellectual prodigy of the school. Even on this first day, miserable as it was, she had won a few plaudits for her quickness and powers of observation. How much better could she work when she had really fallen into the tone of the school, and understood the lessons which she was now so carefully preparing! During her busy day she had failed to notice one thing: namely, the absence of Annie Forest. Annie had not been in the school-room, had not been in the play-room; but now, as the clock struck eight, she entered the school-room with a listless expression, and took her place in the same class with Hester. Her

eyes were heavy, as if she had been crying, and when a companion touched her, and gave her a sympathising glance, she shook her head with a sorrowful gesture, but did not speak. Glasses of milk and slices of bread and butter were now handed round to the girls, and Miss Danesbury asked if any one would like to see Mrs. Willis before prayers. Hester half sprang to her feet, but then sat down again. Mrs. Willis had annoyed her by refusing to break her rules and answer her question during lesson hours. No, the silly child resolved that she would not trouble Mrs. Willis now.

"No one to-night, then?" said Miss Danesbury, who had noticed Hester's movement.

Suddenly Annie Forest sprang to her feet.

"I'm going, Miss Danesbury," she said. "You need not show me the way; I can find it alone."

With her short, curly hair falling about her face, she ran out of the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

"YOU HAVE WAKED ME TOO SOON."

When Hester reached her bedroom after prayers on that second evening, she was dismayed to find that she no longer could consider the pretty little bedroom her own. It had not only an occupant, but an occupant who had left untidy traces of her presence on the floor, for a stocking lay in one direction and a muddy boot sprawled in another. The new-comer had herself got into bed, where she lay with a quantity of red hair tossed about on the pillow, and a heavy

freckled face turned upwards, with the eyes shut and the mouth slightly open.

As Hester entered the room, from these parted lips came unmistakable and loud snores. She stood still dismayed.

"How terrible!" she said to herself—"oh, what a girl! and I cannot sleep in the room with any one who snores—I really cannot!"

She stood perfectly still, with her hands clasped before her, and her eyes fixed with almost ludicrous dismay on this unexpected trial. As she gazed, a fresh discovery caused her to utter an exclamation of horror aloud.

The new-comer had curled herself up comfortably in *her* bed. Suddenly, to her surprise, a voice said very quietly, without a flicker of expression coming over the calm face, or the eyes even making an effort to open—

"Are you my new school-mate?"

"Yes," said Hester, "I am sorry to say I am."

"Oh, don't be sorry, there's a good creature; there's nothing to be sorry about. I'll stop snoring when I turn on my side—it's all right. I always snore for half an hour to rest my back, and the time is nearly up. Don't trouble me to open my eyes, I am not the least curious to see you. You have a cross voice, but you'll get used to me after a bit."

"But you're in my bed," said Hester. "Will you please to get into your own?"

"Oh, no, don't ask me; I like your bed best. I slept in it the whole of last term. I changed the sheets myself, so it does not matter. Do you mind putting my muddy boots outside the door, and folding up my stockings? I forgot them, and I shall have a

bad mark if Danesbury comes in. Good night—I'm turning on my side—I won't snore any more."

The heavy face was now only seen in profile, and Hester, knowing that Miss Danesbury would soon appear to put out the candle, had to hurry into the other bed as fast as she could; something impelled her, however, to take up the muddy boots with two very gingerly fingers, and place them outside the door.

She slept better this second night, and was not quite so startled the next morning when the remorseless gong aroused her from slumber. The maid-servant came in as usual to light the candles, and to place two cans of hot water by the two wash-hand stands.

"You are awake, miss?" she said to Hester.

"Oh, yes," replied Hester almost cheerfully.

"Well, that's all right," said the servant. "Now I must try and rouse Miss Drummond, and she always takes a deal of waking; and if you don't mind, miss, it will be an act of kindness to call out to her in the middle of your own dressing—that is, if I don't wake her effectual."

With these words, the housemaid approached the bed where the red-haired girl lay again on her back, and again snoring loudly.

"Miss Drummond, wake, miss; it's half-past six. Wake up, miss—I have brought your hot water."

"Eh?—what?" said the voice in the bed sleepily, "don't bother me, Hannah—I—I've determined not to ride this morning; go away—" then more sleepily, and in a lower key, "Tell Percy he can't bring the dogs in here."

"I ain't neither your Hannah, nor your Percy, nor one of the dogs," replied the rather irate Alice—

"There, get up, miss, do. I never see such a young lady for sleeping, never."

"I won't be bothered," said the occupant of the bed, and now she turned deliberately on her side and snored more loudly than ever.

"There's no help for it," said Alice: "I have to do it nearly every morning, so don't you be startled, miss. Poor thing, she would never have a good conduct mark but for me. Now then, here goes. You needn't be frightened, miss—she don't mind it the least bit in the world."

Here Alice seized a rough Turkish towel, placed it under the sleepy head with its shock of red hair, and, dipping a sponge in a basin of icy cold water, dashed it on the white face.

This remedy proved effectual: two large pale blue eyes opened wide, a voice said in a tranquil and unmoved tone—

"Oh, thank you, Alice. So I'm back at this horrid, detestable school again?"

"Get your feet well on the carpet, Miss Drummond, before you falls off again," said the servant. "Now then, you'd better get dressed as fast as possible, miss—you have lost five minutes already."

Hester, who had laughed immoderately during this little scene, was already up and going through the processes of her toilet. Miss Drummond, seated on the edge of her bed, regarded her with sleepy eyes.

"So you are my new room-mate?" she said—"What's your name?"

"Hester Thornton," replied Hetty with dignity.

"Oh—I'm Susy Drummond—you may call me Susy if you like."

Hester made no response to this gracious invitation.

Miss Drummond sat motionless, gazing down at her toes.

"Had not you better get dressed?" said Hester after a long pause, for she really feared the young lady would fall asleep where she was sitting.

Miss Drummond started.

"Dressed! So I will, dear creature. Have the sweet goodness to hand me my clothes."

"Where are they?" asked Hester rather crossly, for she did not care to act as lady's-maid.

"They are over there, on a chair, in that lovely heap with a shawl flung over them. There, toss them this way—I'll get into them somehow."

Miss Drummond did manage to get into her garments; but her whole appearance was so heavy and untidy when she was dressed, that Hester by the very force of contrast felt obliged to take extra pains with her own toilet.

"Now, that's a comfort," said Susan, "I'm in my clothes. How bitter it is! There's one comfort, the chapel will be warm. I often catch forty winks in chapel—that is, if I'm lucky enough to get behind one of the tall girls, where Mrs. Willis won't see me. It does seem to me," continued Susan in a meditative tone, "the strangest thing why girls are not allowed sleep enough."

Hester was pinning a clean collar round her neck when Miss Drummond came up close, leant over the dressing-table, and regarded her with languid curiosity.

"A penny for your thoughts, Miss Prunes and Prism."

"Why do you call me that?" said Hester angrily.

"Because you look like it, sweet. Now, don't be

cross, little pet—no one over yet was cross with sleepy Susy Drummond. Now, tell me, love, what had you for breakfast yesterday?"

"I'm sure I forget," said Hester.

"You *forget?*—how extraordinary! You're sure that it was not buttered scones? We have them sometimes, and I tell you they are enough even to keep a girl awake. Well, at least you can let me know if the eggs were very stale, and the coffee very weak, and whether the butter was second-rate Dorset, or good and fresh. Come now—my breakfast is of immense importance to me, I assure you."

"I dare say," answered Hester. "You can see for yourself this morning what is on the table—I can only inform you that it was good enough for me, and that I don't remember what it was."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Susan Drummond, "I'm afraid she has a little temper of her own—poor little room-mate. I wonder if chocolate-creams would sweeten that little temper?"

"Please don't talk—I'm going to say my prayers," said Hester.

She did kneel down, and made a slight effort to ask God to help her through the day's work and the day's play. In consequence, she rose from her knees with a feeling of strength and sweetness which even the feeblest prayer when uttered in earnest can always give.

The prayer-gong now sounded, and all the girls assembled in the chapel. Miss Drummond was greeted by many appreciative nods, and more than one pair of longing eyes gazed in the direction of her pockets, which stuck out in the most ungainly fashion.

Hester was relieved to find that her room-mate

did not share her class in school, nor sit anywhere near her at table.

When the half-hour's recreation after breakfast arrived, Hester, determined to be beholden to none of her school-mates for companionship, seated herself comfortably in an easy chair, with a new book. Presently she was startled by a little stream of lollipops falling in a shower over her head, down her neck, and into her lap. She started up with an expression of disgust. Instantly Miss Drummond sank into the vacated chair.

"Thank you, love," she said, in a cosy, purring voice. "Eat your lollipops, and look at me; I'm going to sleep. Please pull my toe when Danesbury comes in. Oh, fie! Prunes and Prisms—not so cross—eat your lollipops; they will sweeten the expression of that—little—face."

The last words came out drowsily. As she said "face," Miss Drummond's languid eyes were closed—she was fast asleep.

CHAPTER IX.

WORK AND PLAY.

In a few days Hester was accustomed to her new life. She fell into its routine, and in a certain measure won the respect of her fellow-pupils. She worked hard, and kept her place in class, and her French became a little more like the French tongue and a little less like the English. She showed marked ability in many of her other studies, and the mistresses and masters spoke well of her. After a fortnight

spent at Lavender House, Hester had to acknowledge that the little Misses Bruce were right, and that school might be a really enjoyable place for some girls. She would not yet admit that it could be enjoyable for her. Hester was too shy, too proud, too exacting to be popular with her school-fellows. She knew nothing of school-girl life—she had never learned the great secret of success in all life's perplexities, the power to give and take. It never occurred to Hester to look over a hasty word, to take no notice of an envious or insolent look. As far as her lessons were concerned, she was doing well; but the hardest lesson of all, the training of mind and character, which the daily companionship of her school-fellows alone could give her, in this lesson she was making no way. Each day she was shutting herself up more and more from all kindly advances, and the only one in the school whom she sincerely and cordially liked was gentle Cecil Temple.

Mrs. Willis had some ideas with regard to the training of her young people which were peculiarly her own. She had found them successful, and, during her thirty years' experience, had never seen reason to alter them. She was determined to give her girls a great deal more liberty than was accorded in most of the boarding-schools of her day. She never made what she called impossible rules; she allowed the girls full liberty to chatter in their bedrooms; she did not watch them during play-hours; she never read the letters they received, and only superintended the specimen home letter which each girl was required to write once a month. Other head-mistresses wondered at the latitude she allowed her girls, but she invariably replied—

"I always find it works best to trust them. If a girl is found to be utterly untrustworthy, I don't expel her, but I request her parents to remove her to a more strict school."

Mrs. Willis also believed much in that quiet half-hour each evening, when the girls who cared to come could talk to her alone. On these occasions she always dropped the school-mistress and adopted the *rôle* of the mother. With a very refractory pupil she spoke in the tenderest tones of remonstrance and affection at these times. If her words failed—if the discipline of the day and the gentle sympathy of these moments at night did not effect their purpose, she had yet another expedient—the vicar was asked to see the girl who would not yield to this motherly influence.

Mr. Everard had very seldom taken Mrs. Willis's place. As he said to her, "Your influence must be the mainspring. At supreme moments I will help you with personal influence, but otherwise, except for my nightly prayers with your girls, and my weekly class, and the teachings which they with others hear from my lips Sunday after Sunday, they had better look to you."

The girls knew this rule well, and the one or two rare instances in the school history where the vicar had stepped in to interfere, were spoken of with bated breath and with intense awe.

Mrs. Willis had a great idea of bringing as much happiness as possible into young lives. It was with this idea that she had the quaint little compartments railed off in the play-room.

"For the elder girls," she would say, "there is no pleasure so great as having, however small the spot, a

little liberty hall of their own. In her compartment each girl is absolute monarch. No one can enter inside the little curtained rail without her permission. Here she can show her individual taste, her individual ideas. Here she can keep her most prized possessions. In short, her compartment in the play-room is a little home to her."

The play-room, large as it was, admitted of only twenty compartments; these compartments were not easily won. No amount of cleverness attained them; they were altogether dependent on conduct. No girl could be the honourable owner of her own little drawing-room until she had distinguished herself by some special act of kindness and self-denial. Mrs. Willis had no fixed rule on this subject. She alone gave away the compartments, and she often made choice of girls on whom she conferred this honour in a way which rather puzzled and surprised their fellows.

When the compartment was won it was not a secure possession. To retain it depended also on conduct; and here again Mrs. Willis was absolute in her sway. More than once the girls had entered the room in the morning to find some favourite's furniture removed and her little possessions taken carefully down from the walls, the girl herself alone knowing the reason for this sudden change. Annie Forest, who had been at Lavender House for four years, had once, for a solitary month of her existence, owned her own special drawing-room. She had obtained it as a reward for an act of heroism. One of the little pupils had set her pinafore on fire. There was no teacher present at the moment—the other girls had screamed and run for help, but Annie, very pale, had

caught the little one in her arms and had crushed out the flames with her own hands. The child's life was spared, the child was not even hurt, but Annie was in hospital for a week. At the end of a week she returned to the school-room and play-room as the heroine of the hour. Mrs. Willis herself kissed her brow, and presented her in the midst of the approving smiles of her companions with the prettiest drawing-room of the sets. Annie retained her honourable post for one month.

Never did the girls of Lavender House forget the delights of that month. The fantastic arrangements of the little drawing-room filled them with ecstasies. Annie was truly Japanese in her style—she was also intensely liberal in all her arrangements. In the tiny space of this little enclosure wild pranks were perpetrated, ceaseless jokes made up. From Annie's drawing-room issued peals of exquisite mirth. She gave afternoon tea from a Japanese set of tea-things. Outside her drawing-room always collected a crowd of girls, who tried to peep over the rail or to draw aside the curtains. Inside the sacred spot certainly reigned chaos, and one day Miss Danesbury had to fly to the rescue, for in a fit of mad mirth Annie herself had knocked down the little Japanese tea-table, the tea-pot and tea-things were in fragments on the floor, and the tea and milk poured in streams outside the curtains. Mrs. Willis sent for Annie that evening, and Miss Forest retired from her interview with red eyes and a meek expression.

"Girls," she said, in confidence that night, "good-bye to Japan. I gave her leave to do it—the care of an empire is more than I can manage."

The next day the Japanese drawing-room had

been handed over to another possessor, and Annie reigned as queen over her empire no more.

Mrs. Willis, anxious at all times that her girls should be happy, made special arrangements for their benefit on Sunday. Sunday was by no means dull at Lavender House—Sunday was totally unlike the six days which followed it. Even the stupidest girl could scarcely complain of the severity of Sunday lessons—even the merriest girl could scarcely speak of the day as dull. Mrs. Willis made an invariable rule of spending all Sunday with her pupils. On this day she really unbent—on this day she was all during the long hours, what she was during the short half-hour on each evening in the week. On Sunday she neither reproved nor corrected. If punishment or correction were necessary, she deputed Miss Good or Miss Danesbury to take her place. On Sunday she sat with the little children round her knee, and the older girls clustering about her. Her gracious and motherly face was like a sun shining in the midst of these young girls. In short, she was like the personified form of Goodness in their midst. It was necessary therefore that all those who wished to do right should be happy on Sunday, and only those few who deliberately preferred evil should shrink from the brightness of this day.

It is astonishing how much a sympathising and guiding spirit can effect. The girls at Lavender House thought Sunday the shortest day in the week. There were no unoccupied or dull moments—school toil was forgotten—school punishment ceased, to be resumed again if necessary on Monday morning. The girls in their best dresses could chatter freely in

English—they could read their favourite books—they could wander about the house as they pleased: for on Sunday the two baize doors were always wide open, and Mrs. Willis's own private suite of rooms was ready to receive them. If the day was fine they walked to church, each choosing her own companion for the pleasant walk; if the day was wet there was service in the chapel, Mr. Everard always conducting either morning or evening prayers. In the afternoon the girls were allowed to do pretty much as they pleased, but after tea there always came a delightful hour, when the elder girls retired with their mistress into her own special boudoir, and she either told them stories or sang to them as only she could sing. At sixty years of age Mrs. Willis still possessed the most sympathetic and touching voice those girls had ever listened to. Hester Thornton broke down completely on her first Sunday at Lavender House when she heard her schoolmistress sing "The Better Land." No one remarked on her tears, but two people saw them; for her mistress kissed her tenderly that night, and said a few strong words of help and encouragement, and Annie Forest, who made no comment, had also seen them, and wondered vaguely if this new and disagreeable pupil had a heart after all.

On Sunday night Mrs. Willis herself went round to each little bed and gave a mother-kiss to each of her pupils—a mother-kiss and a murmured blessing; and in many breasts resolves were then formed which were to help the girls through the coming week. Some of these resolves, made not in their own strength, bore fruit in long after-years. There is no doubt that very few girls who lived long enough at Lavender House ever in after-days found their Sundays dull.

CHAPTER X.

VARIETIES.

WITHOUT any doubt, wild, naughty, impulsive Annie Forest was the most popular girl in the school. She was always in scrapes—she was scarcely ever out of hot water—her promises of amendment were truly like the proverbial pie-crust; but she was so lovable, so kind-hearted, so saucy and piquante and pretty, that very few could resist the nameless charm which she possessed. The little ones adored Annie, who was kindness itself to them; the bigger girls could not help admiring her fearlessness and courage; the best and noblest girls in the school tried to influence her for good. She was more or less an object of interest to every one; her courage was of just the sort to captivate school-girls, and her moral weakness was not observed by these inexperienced young eyes.

Hester alone, of all the girls who for a long time had come to Lavender House, failed to see any charm in Annie. She began by considering her ill-bred, and when she found she was the school favourite, she tossed her proud little head and determined that she for one would never be subjugated by such a naughty girl. Hester could read character with tolerable clearness; she was an observant child—very observant, and very thoughtful for her twelve years; and as the little witch Annie had failed to throw any spell over her, she saw her faults far more clearly than did her companions. There is no doubt that this brilliant, charming, and naughty Annie had heaps of faults:

she had no perseverance; she was all passion and impulse; she could be the kindest of the kind, but from sheer thoughtlessness and wildness she often inflicted severe pain, even on those she loved best. Annie very nearly worshipped Mrs. Willis, she had the most intense adoration for her, she respected her beyond any other human being. There were moments when the impulsive and hot-headed child felt that she could gladly lay down her life for her schoolmistress. Once the mistress was ill, and Annie curled herself up all night outside her door, thereby breaking rules, and giving herself a severe cold; but her passion and agony were so great that she could only be soothed by at last stealing into the darkened room and kissing the face she loved.

"Prove your love to me, Annie, by going downstairs and keeping the school rules as perfectly as possible," whispered the teacher.

"I will—I will never break a rule again as long as I live, if you get better, Mrs. Willis," responded the child.

She ran downstairs with her resolves strong within her, and yet in half an hour she was reprimanded for wilful and desperate disobedience.

One day Cecil Temple had invited a select number of friends to afternoon tea in her little drawing-room. It was the Wednesday half-holiday, and Cecil's tea, poured into the tiniest cups and accompanied by thin wafer biscuits, was of the most *recherché* quality. Cecil had invited Hester Thornton, and a tall girl who belonged to the first class and whose name was Dora Russell, to partake of this dainty beverage. They were sitting round the tiny tea-table, on little red stools with groups of flowers

artistically painted on them, and were all three conducting themselves in a most ladylike and refined manner, when Annie Forest's curly head and saucy face popped over the enclosure, and her voice said eagerly—

"Oh, may I be permitted to enter the shrine?"

"Certainly, Annie," said Cecil, in her most cordial tones. "I have got another cup and saucer, and there is a little tea left in the teapot."

Annie came in, and ensconced herself cosily on the floor. It did not matter in the least to her that Hester Thornton's brow grew dark, and that Miss Russell suddenly froze into complete indifference to all her surroundings. Annie was full of a subject which excited her very much: she had suddenly discovered that she wanted to give Mrs. Willis a present, and she wished to know if any of the girls would like to join her.

"I will give her the present this day week," said excitable Annie. "I have quite made up my mind. Will any one join me?"

"But there is nothing special about this day week, Annie," said Miss Temple. "It will neither be Mrs. Willis's birthday, nor Christmas Day, nor New Year's Day, nor Easter Day. Next Wednesday will be just like any other Wednesday. Why should we make Mrs. Willis a present?"

"Oh, because she looks as if she wanted one, poor dear. I thought she looked sad this morning; her eyes drooped and her mouth was down at the corners. I am sure she's wanting something from us all by now, just to show that we love her, you know."

"Pshaw!" here burst from Hester's lips.

"Why do you say that?" said Annie, turning

round with her bright eyes flashing. "You've no right to be so contemptuous when I speak about our —our head-mistress. Oh, Cecil," she continued, "do let us give her a little surprise—some spring flowers, or something just to show her that we love her."

"But *you* don't love her," said Hester, stoutly.

Here was throwing down the gauntlet with a vengeance! Annie sprang to her feet and confronted Hester with a whole torrent of angry words. Hester firmly maintained her position. She said over and over again that love proved itself by deeds, not by words; that if Annie learnt her lessons, and obeyed the school rules, she would prove her affection for Mrs. Willis far more than by empty protestations. Hester's words were true, but they were uttered in an unkind spirit, and the very flavour of truth which they possessed caused them to enter Annie's heart and to wound her deeply. She turned, not red, but very white, and her large and lovely eyes grew misty with unshed tears.

"You are cruel," she gasped, rather than spoke, and then she pushed aside the curtains of Cecil's compartment and walked out of the play-room.

There was a dead silence among the three girls when she left them. Hester's heart was still hot, and she was still inclined to maintain her own position, and to believe she had done right in speaking in so severe a tone to Annie. But even she had been made a little uneasy by the look of deep suffering which had suddenly transformed Annie's charming childish face into that of a troubled and pained woman. She sat down meekly on her little three-legged stool and, taking up her tiny cup and saucer, sipped some of the cold tea.

Cecil Temple was the first to speak.

"How could you?" she said, in an indignant voice for her. "Annie is not the girl to be driven, and, in any case, it is not for you to correct her. Oh, Mrs. Willis would have been so pained had she heard you—you were not *kind*, Miss Thornton. There, I don't wish to be rude, but I fear I must leave you and Miss Russell—I must try and find Annie."

"I'm going back to my own drawing-room," said Miss Russell, rising to her feet. "Perhaps," she added, turning round with a very gracious smile to Hester, "you will come and see me there, after tea, this evening."

Miss Russell drew aside the curtains of Cecil Temple's little room, and disappeared. Hester, with her eyes full of tears, now turned eagerly to Cecil.

"Forgive me, Cecil," she exclaimed. "I did not mean to be unkind, but it is really quite ridiculous the way you all spoil that girl—you know as well as I do that she is a very naughty girl. I suppose it is because of her pretty face," continued Hester, "that you are all so unjust, and so blind to her faults."

"You are prejudiced the other way, Hester," said Cecil in a more gentle tone. "You have disliked Annie from the first. There don't keep me—I must go to her now. There is no knowing what harm your words may have done. Annie is not like other girls. If you knew her story, you would perhaps be kinder to her."

Cecil then ran out of her drawing-room, leaving Hester in sole possession of the little tea-things and the three-legged stools. She sat and thought for some time; she was a girl with a great deal of obstinacy in her nature, and she was not disposed to

yield her own point, even to Cecil Temple; but Cecil's words had, nevertheless, made some impression on her.

At tea-time that night, Annie and Cecil entered the room together. Annie's eyes were as bright as stars, and her usually pale cheeks glowed with a deep colour. She had never looked prettier—she had never looked so defiant, so mischievous, so utterly reckless. Mdlle. Perier fired indignant French at her across the table. Annie answered respectfully, and became demure in a moment; but even in the short instant in which the governess was obliged to lower her eyes to her plate, she had thrown a look so irresistibly comic at her companions, that several of them had tittered aloud. Not once did she glance at Hester, although she occasionally looked boldly in her direction; but when she did so, her versatile face assumed a blank expression, as if she were seeing nothing. When tea was over, Dora Russell surprised the members of her own class by walking straight up to Hester, putting her hand inside her arm, and leading her off to her own very refined-looking little drawing-room.

"I want to tell you," she said, when the two girls found themselves inside the small enclosure, "that I quite agree with you in your opinion of Miss Forest. I think you were very brave to speak to her as you did to-day. As a rule, I never trouble myself with what the little girls in the third class do, and of course Annie seldom comes under my notice; but I think she is a decidedly spoilt child, and your rebuff will doubtless do her a great deal of good."

These words of commendation, coming from tall and dignified Miss Russell, completely turned poor Hester's head.

"Oh, I am so glad you think so!" she stammered, colouring high with pleasure. "You see," she added, assuming a little tone of extra refinement, "at home I always associated with girls who were perfect ladies."

"Yes, any one can see that," remarked Miss Russell approvingly.

"And I do think Annie under-bred," continued Hester. "I cannot understand," she added, "why Miss Temple likes her so much."

"Oh, Cecil is so amiable; she sees good in every one," answered Miss Russell. "Annie is evidently not a lady, and I am glad at last to find some one of the girls who belong to the middle school capable of discerning this fact. Of course, we of the first class have nothing whatever to say to Miss Forest, but I really think Mrs. Willis is not acting quite fairly by the other girls when she allows a young person of that description into the school. I wish to assure you, Miss Thornton, that you have at least my sympathy, and I shall be very pleased to see you in my drawing-room now and then."

As these last words were uttered, both girls were conscious of a little rustling sound not far away. Miss Russell drew back her curtain, and asked very sharply, "Who is there?" but no one replied, nor was there any one in sight, for the girls who did not possess compartments were congregated at the other end of the long play-room, listening to stories which Emma Marshall, a clever elder girl, was relating for their benefit.

Miss Russell talked on indifferent subjects to Hester, and at the end of the half-hour the two entered the class-room side by side, Hester's little

head a good deal turned by this notice from one of the oldest girls in the school.

As the two walked together into the school-room, Susan Drummond, who, tall as she was, was only in the fourth class, rushed up to Miss Forest, and whispered something in her ear.

"It is just as I told you," she said, and her sleepy voice was quite wide awake and animated. Annie Forest rewarded her by a playful pinch on her cheek; then she returned to her own class, with a severe reprimand from the class teacher, and silence reigned in the long room, as the girls began to prepare their lessons as usual for the next day.

Miss Russell took her place at her desk in her usual dignified manner. She was a clever girl, and was going to leave school at the end of next term. Hers was a particularly fastidious, but by no means great nature—she was the child of wealthy parents, she was also well-born, and because of her money, and a certain dignity and style which had come to her as nature's gifts, she held an influence, though by no means a large one, in the school. No one particularly disliked her, but no one, again, ardently loved her. The girls in her own class thought it well to be friendly with Dora Russell, and Dora accepted their homage with more or less indifference. She did not greatly care for either their praise or blame. Dora possessed in a strong degree that baneful quality, which more than anything else precludes the love of others—she was essentially selfish.

She sat now before her desk, little guessing how she had caused Hester's small heart to beat by her patronage, and little suspecting the mischief she had done to the girl by her injudicious words. Had

she known, it is to be doubted whether she would have greatly cared. She looked through the books which contained her tasks for the next day's work, and, finding they did not require a great deal of preparation, put them aside, and amused herself during the rest of preparation time with a story-book, which she artfully concealed behind the leaves of some exercises. She knew she was breaking the rules, but this fact did not trouble her, for her moral nature was, after all, no better than poor Annie's, and she had not a tenth of her lovable qualities.

Dora Russell was the soul of neatness and order. To look inside her school desk was a positive pleasure; to glance at her own neat and trim figure was more or less of a delight. Hers were the whitest hands in the school, and hers the most perfectly kept and glossy hair. As the preparation hour drew to a close, she replaced her exercises and books in exquisite order in her school desk and shut down the lid.

Hester's eyes followed her as she walked out of the school-room, for the head class never had supper with the younger girls. Hester wondered if she would glance in her direction; but Miss Russell had gratified a very passing whim when she condescended to notice and praise Hester, and she had already almost forgotten her existence.

At bed-time that night Susan Drummond's behaviour was at the least extraordinary. In the first place, instead of being almost overpoweringly friendly with Hester, she scarcely noticed her; in the next place, she made some very peculiar preparations.

"What *are* you doing on the floor, Susan?" inquired Hetty in an innocent tone.

"That's nothing to you," replied Miss Drummond, turning a dusky red, and looking annoyed at being discovered. "I do wish," she added, "that you would go round to your side of the room and leave me alone; I sha'n't have done what I want to do before Danesbury comes in to put out the candle."

Hester was not going to put herself out with any of Susan Drummond's vagaries; she looked upon sleepy Susan as a girl quite beneath her notice, but even she could not help observing her, when she saw her sit up in bed a quarter of an hour after the candles had been put out, and in the flickering firelight which shone conveniently bright for her purpose, fasten a piece of string first round one of her toes, and then to the end of the bed-post.

"What *are* you doing?" said Hester again, half laughing.

"Oh, what a spy you are!" said Susan. "I want to wake, that's all; and whenever I turn in bed, that string will tug at my toe, and, of course, I'll rouse up. If you were more good-natured, I'd give the other end of the string to you; but, of course, that plan would never answer."

"No, indeed," replied Hester; "I am not going to trouble myself to wake you. You must trust to your sponge of cold water in the morning, unless your own admirable device succeeds."

"I'm going to sleep now, at any rate," answered Susan; "I'm on my back, and I'm beginning to snore; good night."

Once or twice during the night Hester heard groans from the self-sacrificing Susan, who, doubtless, found the string attached to her foot very inconvenient.

Hester, however, slept on when it might have been better for the peace of many in the school that she should have awakened. She heard no sound when, long before day, sleepy Susan stepped softly out of bed, and wrapping a thick shawl about her, glided out of the room. She was away for over half an hour, but she returned to her chamber and got into bed without in the least disturbing Hester. In the morning she was found so soundly asleep that even the sponge of cold water could not arouse her.

"Pull the string at the foot of the bed, Alice," said Hester; "she fastened a string to her toe, and twisted the other end round the bed-post, last night—pull it, Alice, it may effect its purpose."

But there was no string now round Susan Drummond's foot, nor was it found hanging to the bed-post.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT WAS FOUND IN THE SCHOOL-DESK.

The next morning, when the whole school were assembled, and all the classes were getting ready for the real work of the day, Miss Good, the English teacher, stepped to the head of the room, and, holding a neatly bound volume of "Jane Eyre" in her hand, begged to know to whom it belonged. There was a hush of astonishment when she held up the little book, for all the girls knew well that this special volume was not allowed for school literature.

"The housemaid who dusts the school-room found this book on the floor," continued the teacher. "It

lay beside a desk near the top of the room. I see the name has been torn out, so I cannot tell who is the owner. I must request her, however, to step forward and take possession of her property. If there is the slightest attempt at concealment, the whole matter will be laid before Mrs. Willis at noon to-day."

When Miss Good had finished her little speech, she held up the book in its green binding and looked down the room.

Hester did not know why her heart beat—no one glanced at her, no one regarded her; all eyes were fixed on Miss Good, who stood with a severe, unsmiling, but expectant face.

"Come, young ladies," she said, "the owner has surely no difficulty in recognising her own property. I give you exactly thirty seconds more; then, if no one claims the book, I place the affair in Mrs. Willis's hands."

Just then there was a stir amongst the girls in the head class. A tall girl in dove-coloured cashmere, with a smooth head of golden hair, and a fair face which was a good deal flushed at this moment, stepped to the front, and said in a clear and perfectly modulated voice—

"I had no idea of concealing the fact that 'Jane Eyre' belongs to me. I was only puzzled for a moment to know how it got on the floor. I placed it carefully in my desk last night. I think this circumstance ought to be inquired into."

"Oh! oh!" came from several suppressed voices here and there through the room; "whoever would have supposed that Dora Russell would be obliged to humble herself in this way?"

"Attention, young ladies!" said Miss Good; "no talking, if you please. Do I understand. Miss Russell, that 'Jane Eyre' is yours?"

"Yes, Miss Good."

"Why did you keep it in your desk—were you reading it during preparation?"

"Oh, yes, certainly."

"You are, of course, aware that you were breaking two very stringent rules of the school. In the first place, no story-books are allowed to be concealed in a school-desk, or to be read during preparation. In the second place, this special book is not allowed to be read at any time in Lavender House. You know these rules, Miss Russell?"

"Yes, Miss Good."

"I must retain the book—you can return now to your place in class."

Miss Russell bowed sedately, and with an apparently unmoved face, except for the slightly deepened glow on her smooth cheek, resumed her interrupted work.

Lessons went on as usual, but during recreation the mystery of the discovered book was largely discussed by the girls. As is the custom of schoolgirls, they took violent sides in the matter—some rejoicing in Dora's downfall, some pitying her intensely. Hester was, of course, one of Miss Russell's champions, and she looked at her with tender sympathy when she came with her haughty and graceful manner into the school-room, and her little heart beat with a vague hope that Dora might turn to her for sympathy.

Dora, however, did nothing of the kind. She refused to discuss the affair with her companions,

and none of them quite knew what Mrs. Willis said to her, or what special punishment was inflicted on the proud girl. Several of her school-fellows expected that Dora's drawing-room would be taken away from her, but she still retained it; and after a few days the affair of the book was almost forgotten.

There was, however, an uncomfortable and an uneasy spirit abroad in the school. Susan Drummond, who was certainly one of the most uninteresting girls in Lavender House, was often seen walking with and talking to Miss Forest. Sometimes Annie shook her pretty head over Susan's remarks; sometimes she listened to her; sometimes she laughed and spoke eagerly for a moment or two, and appeared to acquiesce in suggestions which her companion urged.

Annie had always been the soul of disorder—of wild pranks, of naughty and disobedient deeds—but, hitherto, in all her wildness she had never intentionally hurt any one but herself. Hers was a giddy and thoughtless, but by no means a bitter tongue—she thought well of all her school-fellows—and on occasions she could be self-sacrificing and good-natured to a remarkable extent. The girls of the head class took very little notice of Annie, but her other school-companions, as a rule, succumbed to her sunny, bright, and witty ways. She offended them a hundred times a day, and a hundred times a day was forgiven. Hester was the first girl in the third class who had ever persistently disliked Annie, and Annie, after making one or two overtures of friendship, began to return Miss Thornton's aversion; but she had never cordially hated her until the day they met in Cecil Temple's drawing-room, and Hester

had wounded Annie in her tenderest part by doubting her affection for Mrs. Willis.

Since that day there was a change very noticeable in Annie Forest—she was not so gay as formerly, but she was a great deal more mischievous—she was not nearly so daring, but she was capable now of little actions, slight in themselves, which yet were calculated to cause mischief and real unhappiness. Her sudden friendship with Susan Drummond did her no good, and she persistently avoided all intercourse with Cecil Temple, who hitherto had influenced her in the right direction.

The incident of the green book had passed with no apparent result of grave importance, but the spirit of mischief which had caused this book to be found was by no means asleep in the school. Pranks were played in a most mysterious fashion with the girls' properties.

Hester herself was the very next victim. She too was a neat and orderly child—she was clever and thoroughly enjoyed her school work. She was annoyed, therefore, and dreadfully puzzled, by discovering one morning that her neat French exercise book was disgracefully blotted, and one page torn across. She was severely reprimanded by Mdlle. Perier for such gross untidiness and carelessness, and when she assured the governess that she knew nothing whatever of the circumstance, that she was never guilty of blots, and had left the book in perfect order the night before, the French lady only shrugged her shoulders, made an expressive gesture with her eyebrows, and plainly showed Hester that she thought the less she said on that subject the better.

Hester was required to write out her exercise again, and she fancied she saw a triumphant look in Annie Forest's eyes as she left the school-room, where poor Hester was obliged to remain to undergo her unmerited punishment.

"Cecil," called Hester, in a passionate and eager voice, as Miss Temple was passing her place.

Cecil paused for a moment.

"What is it, Hetty?—oh, I am so sorry you must stay in this lovely bright day."

"I have done nothing wrong," said Hester; "I never blotted this exercise-book; I never tore this page. It is most unjust not to believe my word; it is most unjust to punish me for what I have not done."

Miss Temple's face looked puzzled and sad.

"I must not stay to talk to you now, Hester," she whispered; "I am breaking the rules. You can come to my drawing-room by-and-by, and we will discuss this matter."

But Hester and Cecil, talk as they would, could find no solution to the mystery. Cecil absolutely refused to believe that Annie Forest had anything to do with the matter.

"No," she said, "such deceit is not in Annie's nature. I would do anything to help you, Hester; but I can't, and I won't, believe that Annie tried deliberately to do you any harm."

"I am quite certain she did," retorted Hester, "and from this moment I refuse to speak to her until she confesses what she has done and apologises to me. Indeed, I have a great mind to go and tell everything to Mrs. Willis."

"Oh, I would not do that," said Cecil; "none of your school-fellows would forgive you if you charged

such a favourite as Annie with a crime which you cannot in the least prove against her. You must be patient, Hester, and if you are, I will take your part, and try to get at the bottom of the mystery."

Cecil, however, failed to do so. Annie laughed when the affair was discussed in her presence, but her clear eyes looked as innocent as the day, and nothing would induce Cecil to doubt Miss Forest's honour.

The mischievous sprite, however, who was sowing such seeds of unhappiness in the hitherto peaceful school was not satisfied with two deeds of daring; for a week afterwards Cecil Temple found a book of Mrs. Browning's, out of which she was learning a piece for recitation, with its cover half torn off, and, still worse, a caricature of Mrs. Willis sketched with some cleverness and a great deal of malice on the title-page. On the very same morning, Dora Russell, on opening her desk, was seen to throw up her hands with a gesture of dismay. The neat composition she had finished the night before was not to be seen in its accustomed place, but in a corner of the desk were two bulky and mysterious parcels, one of which contained a great junk of rich plum-cake, and the other some very sticky and messy "Turkish delight"; while the paper which enveloped these luxuries was found to be that on which the missing composition was written. Dora's face grew very white—she forgot the ordinary rules of the school, and, leaving her class, walked down the room, and interrupted Miss Good, who was beginning to instruct the third class in English grammar.

"Will you please come and see something in my desk, Miss Good?" she said in a voice which trembled with excitement.

It was while she was speaking that Cecil found the

copy of Mrs. Browning mutilated, and with the disgraceful caricature on its title-page. Startled as she was by this discovery, and also by Miss Russell's extraordinary behaviour, she had presence of mind enough to hide the sight which pained her from her companions. Unobserved, in the strong interest of the moment, for all the girls were watching Dora Russell and Miss Good, she managed to squeeze the little volume into her pocket. She had indeed received a great shock, for she knew well that the only girl who could caricature in the school was Annie Forest. For a moment her troubled eyes sought the ground, but then she raised them and looked at Annie. Annie, however, with a particularly cheerful face, and her bright dark eyes full of merriment, was gazing in astonishment at the scene which was taking place in front of Miss Russell's desk.

Dora, whose enunciation was very clear, seemed to have absolutely forgotten herself; she disregarded Miss Good's admonitions, and declared stoutly that at such a moment she did not care what rules she broke. She was quite determined that the culprit who had dared to desecrate her composition, and put plum-cake and "Turkish delight" into her desk, should be publicly exposed and punished.

"The thing cannot go on any longer, Miss Good," she said; "there is a girl in this school who ought to be expelled from it, and I for one declare openly that I will not submit to associate with a girl who is worse than unladylike. If you will permit me, Miss Good, I will carry these things at once to Mrs. Willis, and beg of her to investigate the whole affair, and bring the culprit to justice, and to turn her out of the school."

"Stay, Miss Russell," exclaimed the English teacher, "you strangely and completely forget yourself. You are provoked, I own, but you have no right to stand up and absolutely hoist the flag of rebellion in the faces of the other girls. I cannot excuse your conduct. I will myself take away these parcels which were found in your desk, and will report the affair to Mrs. Willis. She will take what steps she thinks right in bringing you to order, and in discovering the author of this mischief. Return instantly to your desk, Miss Russell; you strangely forget yourself."

Miss Good left the room, having removed the plum-cake and "Turkish delight" from Dora Russell's desk, and lessons continued as best they could under such exciting circumstances.

At twelve o'clock that day, just as the girls were preparing to go up to their rooms to get ready for their usual walk, Mrs. Willis came into the schoolroom.

"Stay one moment, young ladies," said the headmistress in that slightly vibrating and authoritative voice of hers. "I have a word or two to say to you all. Miss Good has just brought me a painful story of wanton and cruel mischief. There are fifty girls in this school, who, until lately, lived happily together. There is now one girl amongst the fifty whose object it is to sow seeds of discord and misery among her companions. Miss Good has told me of three different occasions on which mischief has been done to different girls in the school. Twice Miss Russell's desk has been disturbed, once Miss Thornton's. It is possible that other girls may also have suffered who have been noble enough not to complain. There is, however, a grave mischief, in short, a moral disease in

our midst. Such a thing is worse than bodily illness —it must be stamped out instantly and completely at the risk of any personal suffering. I am now going to ask you, girls, a simple question, and I demand instant truth without any reservation. Miss Russell's desk has been tampered with—Miss Thornton's desk has been tampered with. Has any other girl suffered injury—has any other girl's desk been touched?"

Mrs. Willis looked down the long room—her voice had reached every corner, and the quiet, dignified, and deeply-pained expression in her fine eyes was plainly visible to each girl in the school. Even the little ones were startled and subdued by the tone of Mrs. Willis's voice, and one or two of them suddenly burst into tears. Mrs. Willis paused for a full moment, then she repeated her question.

"I insist upon knowing the exact truth, my dear children," she said gently but with great decision.

"My desk has also been tampered with," said Miss Temple in a low voice.

Every one started when Cecil spoke, and even Annie Forest glanced at her with a half-frightened and curious expression. Cecil's voice indeed was so low, so shaken with doubt and pain, that her companions scarcely recognised it.

"Come here, Miss Temple," said Mrs. Willis.

Cecil instantly left her desk and walked up the room.

"Your desk has also been tampered with, you say?" repeated the head-mistress.

"Yes, madam."

"When did you discover this?"

"To-day, Mrs. Willis."

"You kept it to yourself?"

"Yes."

"Will you now repeat in the presence of the school, and in a loud enough voice to be heard by all here, exactly what was done?"

"Pardon me," answered Cecil, and now her voice was a little less agitated and broken, and she looked full into the face of her teacher, "I cannot do that."

"You deliberately disobey me, Cecil?" said Mrs. Willis.

"Yes, madam."

Mrs. Willis's face flushed—she did not, however, look angry—she laid her hand on Cecil's shoulder and looked full into her eyes.

"You are one of my best pupils, Cecil," she said tenderly. "At such a moment as this honour requires you to stand by your mistress. I must insist on your telling me here and now exactly what has occurred."

Cecil's face grew whiter and whiter.

"I cannot tell you," she murmured; "it breaks my heart, but I cannot tell you."

"You have defied me, Cecil," said Mrs. Willis in a tone of deep pain. "I must, my dear, insist on your obedience, but not now. Miss Good, will you take Miss Temple to the chapel? I will come to you, Cecil, in an hour's time."

Cecil walked down the room crying silently. Her deep distress and her very firm refusal to disclose what she knew had made a great impression on her schoolfellows. They all felt troubled and uneasy, and Annie Forest's face was very pale.

"This thing, this wicked, mischievous thing has gone deeper than I feared," said Mrs. Willis, when Cecil had left the room. "Only some very strong motive would make Cecil Temple behave as she is

now doing. She is influenced by a mistaken idea of what is right; she wishes to shield the guilty person. I may as well tell you all, young ladies, that, dear as Cecil is to me, she is now under the ban of my severe displeasure. Until she confesses the truth and humbles herself before me, I cannot be reconciled to her. I cannot permit her to associate with you. She has done very wrong, and her punishment must be proportionately severe. There is one chance for her, however. Will the girl whom she is mistakenly, though generously, trying to shield, come forward and confess her guilt, and so release poor Cecil from the terrible position in which she has placed herself? By doing so, the girl who has caused all this misery will at least show me that she is trying to repent."

Mrs. Willis paused again, and now she looked down the room with a face of almost entreaty. Several pairs of eyes were fixed anxiously on her, several looked away, and many girls glanced in the direction of Annie Forest, who, feeling herself suspected, returned their glances with bold defiance, and instantly assumed her most reckless manner.

Mrs. Willis waited for a full minute.

"The culprit is not noble enough," she said then. "Now, girls, I must ask each of you to come up one by one and deny or confess this charge. As you do so, you are silently to leave the school-room and go up to your rooms, and prepare for the walk which has been so painfully delayed. Miss Conway, you are at the head of the school, will you set the example?"

One by one the girls of the head class stepped up to their teacher, and of each one she asked the same question—

"Are you guilty?"

Each girl replied in the negative and walked out of the school-room. The second class followed the example of the first, and then the third class came up to their teacher. Several ears were strained to hear Annie Forest's answer, but her eyes were lifted fearlessly to Mrs. Willis's face, and her "No!" was heard all over the room.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE CHAPEL.

THE bright light from a full noontide sun was shining in coloured bars through the richly-painted windows of the little chapel when Mrs. Willis sought Cecil Temple there.

Cecil's face was in many ways a remarkable one. Her soft brown eyes were generally filled with a steadfast and kindly ray. Gentleness was her special prerogative, but there was nothing weak about her—hers was the gentleness of a strong and pure and noble soul. To know Cecil was to love her. She was a motherless girl, and the only child of a most indulgent father. Colonel Temple was now in India, and Cecil was to finish her education under Mrs. Willis's care, and then, if necessary, to join her father.

Mrs. Willis had always taken a special interest in this girl. She admired her for her great moral worth. Cecil was not particularly clever, but she was so studious, so painstaking, that she always kept a high place in class. She was without doubt a religious girl, but there was nothing of the prig about her.

She was not, however, ashamed of her religion, and, if the fitting occasion arose, she was fearless in expressing her opinion.

Mrs. Willis used to call Cecil her "little standard-bearer," and she relied greatly on her influence over the third-class girls. Mrs. Willis considered the third class, perhaps, the most important in the school. She was often heard to say—

"The girls who fill this class have come to a turning-point—they have come to the age when resolves may be made for life, and kept. The good third-class girl is very unlikely to degenerate as she passes through the second and first classes. On the other hand, there is very little hope that the idle or mischievous third-class girl will mend her ways as she goes higher in the school."

Mrs. Willis's steps were very slow, and her thoughts extremely painful, as she entered the chapel to-day. Had any one else offered her defiance she would have known how to deal with the culprit, but Cecil would never have acted as she did without the strongest motive, and Mrs. Willis felt more sorrowful than angry as she sat down by the side of her favourite pupil.

"I have kept you waiting longer than I intended, my dear," she said. "I was unexpectedly interrupted, and I am sorry; but you have had more time to think, Cecil."

"Yes, I have thought," answered Cecil, in a very low tone.

"And, perhaps," continued her governess, "in this quiet and beautiful and sacred place, my dear pupil has also prayed?"

"I have prayed," said Cecil.

"Then you have been guided, Cecil," said Mrs. Willis in a tone of relief. "We do not come to God in our distress without being shown the right way. Your doubts have been removed, Cecil; you can now speak fully to me: can you not, dear?"

"I have asked God to tell me what is right," said Cecil. "I don't pretend to know. I am very much puzzled. It seems to me that more good would be done if I concealed what you asked me to confess in the school-room. My own feeling is that I ought not to tell you. I know this is great disobedience, and I am quite willing to receive any punishment you think right to give me. Yes, I think I am quite willing to receive *any* punishment."

Mrs. Willis put her hand on Cecil's shoulder.

"Ordinary punishments are not likely to affect you, Cecil," she said; "on you I have no idea of inflicting extra lessons, or depriving you of half-holidays, or even taking away your drawing-room. But there is something else you must lose, and that I know will touch you deeply—I must remove from you my confidence."

Cecil's face grew very pale.

"And your love, too?" she said, looking up with imploring eyes; "oh, surely not your love as well?"

"I ask you frankly, Cecil," replied Mrs. Willis, "can perfect love exist without perfect confidence? I would not willingly deprive you of my love, but of necessity the love I have hitherto felt for you must be altered—in short, the old love which enabled me to rest on you and trust you, will cease."

Cecil covered her face with her hands.

"This punishment is very cruel," she said. "You are right; it reaches down to my very heart. But,"

she added, looking up with a strong and sweet light in her face, "I will try and bear it, and some day you will understand."

"Listen, Cecil," said Mrs. Willis: "you have just told me you have prayed to God, and have asked Him to show you the right path. Now, my dear, suppose we kneel together, and both of us ask Him to show us the way out of this difficult matter. I want to be guided to use the right words with you, Cecil. You want to be guided to receive the instruction which I, as your teacher and mother-friend, would give you."

Cecil and Mrs. Willis both knelt down, and the head-mistress said a few words in a voice of great earnestness and entreaty; then they resumed their seats.

"Now, Cecil," said Mrs. Willis, "you must remember in listening to me that I am speaking to you as I believe God wishes me to. If I can convince you that you are doing wrong in concealing what you know from me, will you act as I wish in the matter?"

"I long to be convinced," said Cecil, in a low tone.

"That is right, my dear; I can now speak to you with perfect freedom. My words you will remember, Cecil, are now, I firmly believe, directed by God; they are also the result of a large experience. I have trained many girls. I have watched the phases of thought in many young minds. Cecil, look at me. I can read you like a book."

Cecil looked up expectantly.

"Your motive for this concealment is as clear as the daylight, Cecil. You are keeping back what you

know because you want to shield some one. Am I not right, my dear?"

The colour flooded Cecil's pale face. She bent her head in silent assent, but her eyes were too full of tears, and her lips trembled too much to allow her to speak.

"The girl you want to defend," continued Mrs. Willis, in that clear patient voice of hers, "is one whom you and I both love; is one for whom we both have prayed; is one for whom we would both gladly sacrifice ourselves if necessary—her name is——"

"Oh, don't," said Cecil imploringly—"don't say her name; you have no right to suspect her."

"I must say her name, Cecil dear. If you suspect Annie Forest, why should not I? You do suspect her, do you not, Cecil?"

Cecil began to cry.

"I know it," continued Mrs. Willis. "Now, Cecil, we will suppose, terrible as this suspicion is, fearfully as it pains us both, that Annie Forest *is* guilty. We must suppose for the sake of my argument that this is the case. Do you not know, my dear Cecil, that you are doing the falsest, cruellest thing by dear Annie in trying to hide her sin from me? Suppose, just for the sake of our argument, that this cowardly conduct on Annie's part was never found out by me: what effect would it have on Annie herself?"

"It would save her in the eyes of the school," said Cecil.

"Just so, but God would know the truth. Her next downfall would be deeper. In short, Cecil, under the idea of friendship you would have done the cruellest thing in all the world for your friend."

Cecil was quite silent.

"This is one way to look at it," continued Mrs. Willis, "but there are many other points from which this case ought to be viewed. You owe much to Annie, but not all—you have a duty to perform to your other schoolfellows. You have a duty to perform to me. If you possess a clue which will enable me to convict Annie Forest of her sin, in common justice you have no right to withhold it. Remember that while she goes about free and unsuspected some other girl is under the ban—some other girl is watched and feared. You fail in your duty to your schoolfellows when you keep back your knowledge, Cecil. When you refuse to trust me, you fail in your duty to your mistress; for I cannot stamp out this evil and wicked thing from our midst unless I know all. When you conceal your knowledge, you ruin the character of the girl you seek to shield. When you conceal your knowledge, you go against God's express wish. There—I have spoken to you as He directed me to speak."

Cecil suddenly sprang to her feet.

"I never thought of all these things," she said. "You are right, but it is very hard, and mine is only a suspicion. Oh, do be tender to her, and—forgive me—may I go away now?"

As she spoke, she pulled out the torn copy of Mrs. Browning, laid it on her teacher's lap, and ran swiftly out of the chapel.

CHAPTER XIII.

TALKING OVER THE MYSTERY.

ANNIE FOREST, sitting in the midst of a group of eager admirers, was chatting volubly. Never had she been in higher spirits, never had her pretty face looked more bright and daring.

Cecil Temple, coming into the play-room, started when she saw her. Annie, however, instantly rose from the low hassock on which she had perched herself and, running up to Cecil, put her hand through her arm.

"We are all discussing the mystery, darling," she she; "we have discussed it, and literally torn it to shreds, and yet never got at the kernel. We have guessed and guessed what your motive can be in concealing the truth from Mrs. Willis, and we all unanimously vote that you are a dear old martyr, and that you have some admirable reason for keeping back the truth. You cannot think what an excitement we are in—even Susy Drummond has stayed awake to listen to our chatter. Now, Cecil, do come and sit here in this most inviting little arm-chair, and tell us what our dear head-mistress said to you in the chapel. It did seem so awful to send you to the chapel, poor dear Cecil."

Cecil stood perfectly still and quiet while Annie was pouring out her torrent of eager words; her eyes, indeed, did not quite meet her companion's, but she allowed Annie to retain her clasp of her arm, and she evidently listened with attention to her words. Now,

however, when Miss Forest tried to draw her into the midst of the eager and animated group who sat round the play-room fire, she hesitated and looked longingly in the direction of her peaceful little drawing-room. Her hesitation, however, was but momentary. Quite silently she walked with Annie down the large play-room and entered the group of girls.

"Here's your throne, Queen Cecil," said Annie, trying to push her into the little arm-chair; but Cecil would not seat herself.

"How nice that you have come, Cecil!" said Mary Pierce, a second-class girl. "I really think, we all think, that you were very brave to stand out against Mrs. Willis as you did. Of course we are devoured with curiosity to know what it means; aren't we, Flo?"

"Yes, we're in agonies," answered Flo Dunstan, another second-class girl.

"You will tell exactly what Mrs. Willis said, darling heroine?" proceeded Annie in her most dulcet tones. "You concealed your knowledge, didn't you? you were very firm, weren't you? dear, brave love!"

"For my part, I think Cecil Temple the soul of brave firmness," here interrupted Susan Drummond. "I fancy she's as hard and firm in herself when she wants to conceal a thing as that rocky sweetmeat which always hurts our teeth to get through. Yes, I do fancy that."

"Oh, Susy, what a horrid metaphor!" here interrupted several girls.

One, however, of the eager group of school-girls had not opened her lips or said a word; that girl was Hester Thornton. She had been drawn into the circle

by an intense curiosity ; but she had made no comment with regard to Cecil's conduct. If she knew anything of the mystery she had thrown no light on it. She had simply sat motionless, with watchful and alert eyes and silent tongue. Now, for the first time, she spoke.

"I think, if you will allow her, that Cecil has got something to say," she remarked.

Cecil glanced down at her with a very brief look of gratitude.

"Thank you, Hester," she said. "I won't keep you a moment, girls. I cannot offer to throw any light on the mystery which makes us all so miserable to-day; but I think it right to undeceive you with regard to myself. I have not concealed what I know from Mrs. Willis. She is in possession of all the facts, and what I found in my desk this morning is now in her keeping. She has made me see that in concealing my knowledge I was acting wrongly, and whatever pain has come to me in the matter, she now knows all."

When Cecil had finished her sad little speech she walked straight out of the group of girls, and, without glancing at one of them, went across the play-room to her own compartment. She had failed to observe a quick and startled glance from Susan Drummond's sleepy blue eyes, nor had she heard her mutter—half to her companions, half to herself—

"Cecil is not like the rocky sweetmeat; I was mistaken in her."

Neither had Cecil seen the flash of almost triumph in Hester's eyes, nor the defiant glance she threw at Miss Forest. Annie stood with her hands clasped, and a little frown of perplexity between her brows, for a moment; then she ran fearlessly down the play-

room, and said in a low voice at the other side of Cecil's curtains—

"May I come in?"

Cecil said "Yes," and Annie, entering the pretty little drawing-room, flung her arms round Miss Temple's neck.

"Cecil," she exclaimed impulsively, "you're in great trouble. I am a giddy, reckless thing, I know, but I don't laugh at people when they are in real trouble. Won't you tell me all about it, Cecil?"

"I will, Annie. Sit down there and I will tell you everything. I think you have a right to know, and I am glad you have come to me. I thought, perhaps—but no matter. Annie, can't you guess what I am going to say?"

"No, I'm sure I can't," said Annie. "I saw for a moment or two to-day that some of those absurd girls suspected me of being the author of all this mischief. Now, you know, Cecil, I love a bit of fun beyond words. If there's any going on I feel nearly mad until I am in it; but what was done to-day was not at all in accordance with my ideas of fun. To tear up Miss Russell's essay and fill her desk with stupid plum-cake and Turkish delight seems to me but a sorry kind of jest. Now, if I had been guilty of that sort of thing, I'd have managed something far cleverer than that. If *I* had tampered with Dora Russell's desk, I'd have done the thing in style. The dear, sweet, dignified creature should have shrieked in real terror. You don't know perhaps, Cecil, that our admirable Dora is no end of a coward. I wonder what she would have said if I had put a little nest of field-mice in her desk! I saw that the poor thing suspected me, as she gave way to her usual little sneer about the

'underbred girl;' but, of course, *you* know me, Cecil. Why, my dear Cecil, what is the matter? How white you are, and you are actually crying! What is it, Cecil? what is it, Cecil, darling?"

Cecil dried her eyes quickly.

"You know my pet copy of Mrs. Browning's poems, don't you, Annie?"

"Oh, yes, of course. You lent it to me one day. Don't you remember how you made me cry over that picture of little Alice, the over-worked factory girl? What about the book, Cecil?"

"I found the book in my desk," said Cecil, in a steady tone, and now fixing her eyes on Annie, who knelt by her side—"I found the book in my desk, although I never keep it there; for it is quite against the rules to keep our recreation books in our school desks, and you know, Annie, I always think it is so much easier to keep these little rules. They are matters of duty and conscience after all. I found my copy of Mrs. Browning in my desk this morning with the cover torn off, and with a very painful and ludicrous caricature of our dear Mrs. Willis sketched on the title-page."

"What?" said Annie. "No, no; impossible!"

"You know nothing about it, do you, Annie?"

"I never put it there, if that's what you mean," said Annie. But her face had undergone a curious change. Her light and easy and laughing manner had altered. When Cecil mentioned the caricature she flushed a vivid crimson. Her flush had quickly died away, leaving her olive-tinted face paler than its wont.

"I see," she said, after a long pause, "you, too, suspected me, Cecil, and that is why you tried to

conceal the thing. You know that I am the only girl in the school who can draw caricatures, but did you suppose that I would show *her* dishonour? Of course things look ugly for me, if this is what you found in your book; but I did not think that *you* would suspect me, Cecil."

"I will believe you, Annie," said Cecil eagerly. "I long beyond words to believe you. With all your faults, no one has ever yet found you out in a lie. If you look at me, Annie, and tell me honestly that you know nothing whatever about that caricature, I will believe you. Yes, I will believe you fully, and I will go with you to Mrs. Willis and tell her that, whoever did the wrong, you are innocent in this matter. Say you know nothing about it, dear, dear Annie, and take a load off my heart."

"I never put the caricature into your book, Cecil."

"And you know nothing about it?"

"I cannot say that; I never—never put it in your book."

"Oh, Annie," exclaimed poor Cecil, "you are trying to deceive me. Why won't you be brave? Oh, Annie, I never thought you would stoop to a lie!"

"I'm telling no lie," answered Annie with sudden passion. "I do know something about the caricature, but I never put it into that book. There! you doubt me, you have ceased to believe me, and I won't waste any more words on the matter.'

CHAPTER XIV.

"SENT TO COVENTRY."

THERE were many girls in the school who remembered that dismal half-holiday—they remembered its forced mirth and its hidden anxiety; and as the hours flew by the suspicion that Annie Forest was the author of all the mischief grew and deepened. A school is like a little world, and popular opinion is apt to change with great rapidity. Annie was undoubtedly the favourite of the school; but favourites are certain to have enemies, and there were several girls unworthy enough and mean enough to be jealous of poor Annie's popularity. She was the kind of girl whom only very small natures could really dislike. Her popularity arose from the simple fact that hers was a peculiarly joyous and unselfish nature. She was a girl with scarcely any self-consciousness; those she loved, she loved devotedly; she threw herself with a certain feverish impetuosity into their lives, and made their interests her own. To get into mischief and trouble for the sake of a friend was an every-day occurrence with Annie. She was not the least studious; she had no one particular talent, unless it was an untrained and bird-like voice; she was always more or less in hot water about her lessons, always behindhand in her tasks, always leaving undone what she should do, and doing what she should not do. She was a contradictory, erratic creature—jealous of no one, envious of no one—dearly loving a joke, and many times inflicting

pain from sheer thoughtlessness, but always ready to say she was sorry, always ready to make friends again.

It is strange that such a girl as Annie should have enemies, but she had, and in the last few weeks the feeling of jealousy and envy which had always been smouldering in some breasts took more active form. Two reasons accounted for this: Hester's openly avowed and persistent dislike to Annie, and Miss Russell's declared conviction that she was underbred and not a lady.

Miss Russell was the only girl in the first class who had hitherto given wild little Annie a thought.

In the first class, to-day, Annie had to act the unpleasing part of the wicked little heroine. Miss Russell was quite certain of Annie's guilt; she and her companions condescended to discuss poor Annie and to pull all her little virtues to pieces, and to magnify her sins to an alarming extent.

After two or three hours of judicious conversation, Dora Russell and most of the other first-class girls decided that Annie ought to be expelled, and unanimously resolved that they, at least, would do what they could to "send her to Coventry."

In the lower part of the school Annie also had a few enemies, and these girls, having carefully observed Hester's attitude towards her, now came up close to this dignified little lady, and asked her boldly to declare her opinion with regard to Annie's guilt.

Hester, without the least hesitation, assured them that "of course Annie had done it."

"There is not room for a single doubt on the subject," she said; "there—look at her now."

At this instant Annie was leaving Cecil's compartment, and with red eyes, and hair, as usual, falling about her face, was running out of the play-room. She seemed in great distress; but, nevertheless, before she reached the door, she stopped to pick up a little girl of five, who was fretting about some small annoyance. Annie took the little one in her arms, kissed her tenderly, whispered some words in her ear, which caused the little face to light up with some smiles and the round arms to clasp Annie with an ecstatic hug. She dropped the child, who ran back to play merrily with her companions, and left the room.

The group of middle-class girls still sat on by the fire, but Hester Thornton now, not Annie, was the centre of attraction. It was the first time in all her young life that Hester had found herself in the enviable position of a favourite; and without at all knowing what mischief she was doing, she could not resist improving the occasion, and making the most of her dislike for Annie.

Several of those who even were fond of Miss Forest came round to the conviction that she was really guilty, and one by one, as is the fashion not only among school girls but in the greater world outside, they began to pick holes in their former favourite. These girls, too, resolved that, if Annie were really so mean as maliciously to injure other girls' property and get them into trouble, she must be "sent to Coventry."

"What's Coventry?" asked one of the little ones, the child whom Annie had kissed and comforted, now sidling up to the group.

"Oh, a nasty place, Phena," said Mary Bell,

putting her arm round the pretty child and drawing her to her side.

"And who is going there?"

"Why, I am afraid it is naughty Annie Forest."

"She's not naughty! Annie sha'n't go to any nasty place. I hate you, Mary Bell." The little one looked round the group with flashing eyes of defiance, then wrenched herself away to return to her younger companions.

"It was stupid of you to say that, Mary," remarked one of the girls. "Well," she continued, "I suppose it is all settled, and poor Annie, to say the least of it, is not a lady. For my own part, I always thought her great fun, but if she is proved guilty of this offence I wash my hands of her."

"We all wash our hands of her," echoed the girls, with the exception of Susan Drummond, who, as usual, was nodding in her chair.

"What do you say, Susy?" asked one or two—"you have not opened your lips all this time."

"I—eh?—what?" asked Susan, stretching herself and yawning, "oh, about Annie Forest—I suppose you are right, girls. Is not that the tea-gong? I'm awfully hungry."

Hester Thornton went into the tea-room that evening feeling particularly virtuous, and with an idea that she had distinguished herself in some way.

Poor foolish, thoughtless Hester, she little guessed what seed she had sown, and what a harvest she was preparing for her own reaping by-and-by.

CHAPTER XV.

ABOUT SOME PEOPLE WHO THOUGHT NO EVIL.

A FEW days after this Hester was much delighted to receive an invitation from her little friends, the Misses Bruce. These good ladies had not forgotten the lonely and miserable child whom they had comforted not a little during her journey to school six weeks ago. They invited Hester to spend the next half-holiday with them, and as this happened to fall on a Saturday, Mrs. Willis gave Hester permission to remain with her friends until eight o'clock, when she would send the carriage to fetch her home.

The trouble about Annie had taken place the Wednesday before, and all the girls' heads were full of the uncleared-up mystery when Hester started on her little expedition.

Nothing was known; no fresh light had been thrown on the subject. Everything went on as usual within the school, and a casual observer would never have noticed the cloud which rested over that usually happy dwelling. A casual observer would have noticed little or no change in Annie Forest: her merry laugh was still heard, her light step still danced across the play-room floor, she was in her place in class, and was, if anything, a little more attentive and a little more successful over her lessons. Her pretty, piquant face, her arch expression, the bright, quick, and droll glance which she alone could give, were still to be seen; but those who knew her

well and those who loved her best saw a change in Annie.

In the playroom she devoted herself exclusively to the little ones; she never went near Cecil Temple's drawing-room, she never mingled with the girls of the middle school as they clustered round the cheerful fire. At meal-times she ate little, and her room-fellow was heard to declare that she was awakened more than once in the middle of the night by the sound of Annie's sobs. In chapel, too, when she fancied herself quite unobserved, her face wore an expression of great pain; but if Mrs. Willis happened to glance in her direction, instantly the little mouth became demure and almost hard, the dark eyelashes were lowered over the bright eyes, the whole expression of the face showed the extreme of indifference. Hester felt more sure than ever of Annie's guilt; but one or two of the other girls in the school wavered in this opinion, and would have taken Annie out of "Coventry" had she herself made the smallest advance towards them.

Annie and Hester had not spoken to each other now for several days; but on this afternoon, which was a bright one in early spring, as Hester was changing her school-dress for her Sunday one, and preparing for her visit to the Misses Bruce, there came a light knock at her door. She said, "Come in!" rather impatiently, for she was in a hurry, and dreaded being kept.

To her surprise Annie Forest put in her curly head, and then, dancing with her usual light movement across the room, she laid a little bunch of dainty spring flowers on the dressing-table beside Hester.

Hester stared, first at the intruder and then at the early primroses. She passionately loved flowers, and would have exclaimed with ecstasy at these had any one brought them in except Annie.

"I want you," said Annie, rather timidly for her, "to take these flowers from me to Miss Agnes and Miss Jane Bruce. It will be very kind of you if you will take them. I am sorry to have interrupted you—thank you very much."

She was turning away when Hester compelled herself to remark—

"Is there any message with the flowers?"

"Oh, no—only Annie Forest's love. They'll understand——" she turned half round as she spoke, and Hester saw that her eyes had filled with tears. She felt touched in spite of herself. There was something in Annie's face now which reminded her of her darling little Nan at home. She had seen the same beseeching, sorrowful look in Nan's brown eyes when she had wanted her friends to kiss her and take her to their hearts and love her.

Hester would not allow herself, however, to feel any tenderness towards Annie. Of course she was not really a bit like sweet little Nan, and it was absurd to suppose that a great girl like Annie could want caressing and petting and soothing; still, in spite of herself, Annie's look haunted her, and she took great care of the little flower-offering, and presented it with Annie's message instantly on her arrival to the little old ladies.

Miss Jane and Miss Agnes were very much pleased with the early primroses. They looked at one another and said—

"Poor dear little girl," in tender voices, and then

they put the flowers into one of their daintiest vases, and made much of them, and showed them to any visitors who happened to call that afternoon.

Their little house looked something like a doll's house to Hester, who had been accustomed all her life to large rooms and spacious passages; but it was the sweetest, daintiest, and most charming little abode in the world. It was not unlike a nest, and the Misses Bruce in certain ways resembled bright little robin redbreasts, so small, so neat, so chirrupy they were.

Hester enjoyed her afternoon immensely; the little ladies were right in their prophecy, and she was no longer lonely at school. She enjoyed talking about her schoolfellows, about her new life, about her studies. The Misses Bruce were decidedly fond of a gossip, but something which she could not at all define in their manner prevented Hester from retailing for their benefit any unkind news. They told her frankly at last that they were only interested in the good things which went on in the school, and that they found no pursuit so altogether delightful as finding out the best points in all the people they came across. They would not even laugh at sleepy, tiresome Susan Drummond; on the contrary, they pitied her, and Miss Jane wondered if the girl could be quite well, whereupon Miss Agnes shook her head, and said emphatically that it was Hester's duty to rouse poor Susy, and to make her waking life so interesting to her that she should no longer care to spend so many hours in the world of dreams.

There is such a thing as being so kind-hearted, so gentle, so charitable as to make the people who have not encouraged these virtues feel quite uncomfortable

By the mere force of contrast they begin to see themselves something as they really are. Since Hester had come to Lavender House she had taken very little pains to please others rather than herself, and she was now almost startled to see how she had allowed selfishness to get the better of her. While the Misses Bruce were speaking, old longings, which had slept since her mother's death, came back to the young girl, and she began to wish that she could be kinder to Susan Drummond, and that she could overcome her dislike to Annie Forest. She longed to say something about Annie to the little ladies, but they evidently did not wish to allude to the subject. When she was going away, they gave her a small parcel.

"You will kindly give this to your schoolfellow, Miss Forest, Hester dear," they both said, and then they kissed her, and said they hoped they should see her again; and Hester got into the old-fashioned school brougham, and held the brown paper parcel in her hand.

As she was going into the chapel that night, Mary Bell came up to her and whispered—

"We have not got to the bottom of that mystery about Annie Forest yet. Mrs. Willis can evidently make nothing of her, and I believe Mr. Everard is going to talk to her after prayers to-night."

As she was speaking, Annie herself pushed rather rudely past the two girls; her face was flushed, and her hair was even more untidy than was its wont.

"Here is a parcel for you, Miss Forest," said Hester, in a much more gentle tone than she was wont to use when she addressed this objectionable school-mate.

All the girls were now filing into the chapel, and Hester should certainly not have presented the little parcel at that moment.

"Breaking the rules, Miss Thornton," said Annie; "all right, toss it here." Then, as Hester failed to comply, she ran back, knocking her schoolfellows out of place, and, snatching the parcel from Hester's hand, threw it high in the air. This was a piece of not only wilful audacity and disobedience, but it even savoured of the profane, for Annie's step was on the threshold of the chapel, and the parcel fell with a noisy bang on the floor some feet inside the little building.

"Bring me that parcel, Annie Forest," whispered the stern voice of the head-mistress.

Annie sullenly complied; but when she came up to Mrs. Willis, her governess took her hand, and pushed her down into a low seat a little behind her.

CHAPTER XVI.

"AN ENEMY HATH DONE THIS."

THE short evening service was over, and one by one, in orderly procession, the girls left the chapel. Annie was about to rise to her feet to follow her school companions, when Mrs. Willis stooped down and whispered something in her ear. Her face became instantly suffused with a dull red; she resumed her seat, and buried her face in both her hands. One or two of the girls noticed her despondent attitude as they left the chapel, and Cecil Temple looked back with a glance of such unutterable sympathy that

Annie's proud, suffering little heart would have been touched could she but have seen the look.

Presently the young steps died away, and Annie, raising her head, saw that she was alone with Mr. Everard, who seated himself in the place which Mrs. Willis had occupied by her side.

"Your governess has asked me to speak to you, my dear," he said, in his kind and fatherly tones; "she wants us to discuss this thing which is making you so unhappy quite fully together." Here the clergyman paused, and, noticing a sudden wistful and soft look in the girl's brown eyes, he continued: "Perhaps, however, you have something to say to me which will throw light on this mystery?"

"No, sir, I have nothing to say," replied Annie, and now again the sullen expression passed like a wave over her face.

"Poor child," said Mr. Everard. "Perhaps, Annie," he continued, "you do not quite understand me—you do not quite read my motive in talking to you to-night. I am not here in any sense to reprove you. You are either guilty of this sin, or you are not guilty. In either case I pity you; it is very hard, very bitter, to be falsely accused—I pity you much if this is the case; but it is still harder, Annie, still more bitter, still more absolutely crushing to be accused of a sin which we are trying to conceal. In that terrible case God Himself hides His face. Poor child, poor child, I pity you most of all if you are guilty."

Annie had again covered her face, and bowed her head over her hands. She did not speak for a moment, but presently Mr. Everard heard a low sob, and then another, and another, until at last her whole frame was shaken with a perfect tempest of weeping.

The old clergyman, who had seen many strange phases of human nature, who had in his day comforted and guided more than one young school girl, was far too wise to do anything to check this flow of grief. He knew Annie would speak more fully and more frankly when her tears were over. He was right. She presently raised a very tear-stained face to the clergyman.

"I felt very bitter at your coming to speak to me," she began. "Mrs. Willis has always sent for you when everything else has failed with us girls, and I did not think she would treat me so. I was determined not to say anything to you. Now, however, you have spoken good words to me, and I can't turn away from you. I will tell you all that is in my heart. I will promise before God to conceal nothing, if only you will do one thing for me."

"What is that, my child?"

"Will you believe me?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Ah, but you have not been tried yet. I thought Mrs. Willis would certainly believe; but she said the circumstantial evidence was too strong—perhaps it will be too strong for you."

"I promise to believe you, Annie Forest; if, before God, you can assure me that you are speaking the whole truth, I will fully believe you."

Annie paused again, then she rose from her seat and stood a pace away from the old minister.

"This is the truth before God," she said, as she locked her two hands together and raised her eyes freely and unshrinkingly to Mr. Everard's face.

"I have always loved Mrs. Willis. I have reasons for loving her which the girls don't know about. The girls don't know that when my mother was dying she

gave me into Mrs. Willis's charge, and she said, 'You must keep Annie until her father comes back.' Mother did not know where father was; but she said he would be sure to come back some day, and look for mother and me; and Mrs. Willis said she would keep me faithfully until father came to claim me. That is four years ago, and my father has never come, nor have I heard of him, and I think, I am almost sure, that the little money which mother left must be all used up. Mrs. Willis never says anything about money, and she did not wish me to tell my story to the girls. None of them know except Cecil Temple. I am sure some day father will come home, and he will give Mrs. Willis back the money she has spent on me; but never, never, never can he repay her for her goodness to me. You see I cannot help loving Mrs. Willis. It is quite impossible for any girl to have such a friend and not to love her. I know I am very wild, and that I do all sorts of mad things. It seems to me that I cannot help myself sometimes; but I would not willingly, indeed, I would not willingly hurt anybody. Last Wednesday, as you know, there was a great disturbance in the school. Dora Russell's desk was tampered with, and so was Cecil Temple's. You know, of course, what was found in both the desks. Mrs. Willis sent for me, and asked me about the caricature which was drawn in Cecil's book. I looked at it and I told her the truth. I did not conceal one thing. I told her the whole truth as far as I knew it. She did not believe me. She said so. What more could I do then?"

Here Annie paused, she began to unclasp and clasp her hands, and she looked full at Mr. Everard with a most pleading expression.

"Do you mind repeating to me exactly what you said to your governess?" he questioned.

"I said this, sir. I said, 'Yes, Mrs. Willis, I did draw that caricature. You will scarcely understand how I, who love you so much, could have been so mad and ungrateful as to do anything to turn you into ridicule. I would cut off my right hand now not to have done it; but I did do it, and I must tell you the truth.' 'Tell me, dear,' she said, quite gently then. 'It was one wet afternoon about a fortnight ago,' I said to her; 'a lot of us middle-school girls were sitting together, and I had a pencil and some bits of paper, and I was making up funny little groups of a lot of us, and the girls were screaming with laughter, for somehow I managed to make the likeness that I wanted in each case. It was very wrong of me, I know. It was against the rules; but I was in one of my maddest humours, and I really did not care what the consequences were. At last one of the girls said. 'You won't dare to make a picture like that of Mrs. Willis, Annie—you know you won't dare.' The minute she said that name I began to feel ashamed. I remembered I was breaking one of the rules, and I suddenly tore up all my bits of paper and flung them into the fire, and I said, 'No, I would not dare to show her dishonour.' Well, afterwards, as I was washing my hands for tea up in my room, the temptation came over me so strongly that I felt I could not resist it, to make a funny little sketch of Mrs. Willis. I had a little scrap of thin paper, and I took out my pencil and did it all in a minute. It seemed to me very funny, and I could not help laughing at it; and then I thrust it into my private writing-case, which I always keep locked, and I put the key in my pocket and ran

downstairs. I forgot all about the caricature. I had never shown it to any one. How it got into Cecil's book is more than I can say. When I had finished speaking Mrs. Willis looked very hard at the book. 'You are right,' she said; 'this caricature is drawn on a very thin piece of paper, which has been cleverly pasted on the title-page.' Then, Mr. Everard, she asked me a lot of questions. Had I ever parted with my keys? Had I ever left my desk unlocked? 'No,' I said, 'my desk is always locked, and my keys are always in my pocket. Indeed,' I added, 'my keys were absolutely safe for the last week, for they went in a white petticoat to the wash, and came back as rusty as possible.' I could not open my desk for a whole week, which was a great nuisance. I told all this story to Mrs. Willis, and she said to me, 'You are positively certain that this caricature has been taken out of your desk by somebody else, and pasted in here. You are sure that the caricature you drew is not to be found in your desk?' 'Yes,' I said; 'how can I be anything but sure: these are my pencil marks, and that is the funny little turn I gave to your neck which made me laugh when I drew it. Yes; I am certainly sure.'"

"'I have always been told, Annie,' Mrs. Willis said, 'that you are the only girl in the school who can draw these caricatures. You have never seen an attempt at this kind of drawing amongst your schoolfellows, or amongst any of the teachers?'

"'I have never seen any of them try this special kind of drawing,' I said. 'I wish I was like them. I wish I had never, never done it.'

"'You have got your keys now?' Mrs. Willis said.

"'Yes,' I answered, pulling them all covered with rust out of my pocket.

"Then she told me to leave the keys on the table, and to go upstairs and fetch down my little private desk.

"I did so, and she made me put the rusty key in the lock and open the desk, and together we searched through its contents. We pulled out everything, or rather I did, and I scattered all my possessions about on the table, and then I looked up almost triumphantly at Mrs. Willis.

"'You see the caricature is not here,' I said, 'somebody picked the lock and took it away.'

"'This lock has not been picked,' Mrs. Willis said, 'and what is that little piece of white paper sticking out of the private drawer?'

"'Oh, I forgot my private drawer,' I said; 'but there is nothing in it—nothing whatever,' and then I touched the spring, and pulled it open, and there lay the little caricature which I had drawn in the bottom of the drawer. There it lay, not as I had left it, for I had never put it into the private drawer. I saw Mrs. Willis's face turn very white, and I noticed that her hands trembled. I was all red myself, and very hot, and there was a choking lump in my throat, and I could not have got a single word out even if I had wished to. So I began scrambling the things back into my desk, as hard as ever I could, and then I locked it, and put the rusty keys back in my pocket.

"'What am I to believe now, Annie?' Mrs. Willis said.

"'Believe anything you like now,' I managed to say; and then I took my desk and walked out of the

room, and would not wait even though she called me back.

"That is the whole story, Mr. Everard," continued Annie. "I have no explanation whatever to give. I did make the one caricature of my dear governess. I did not make the other. The second caricature is certainly a copy of the first, but I did not make it. I don't know who made it. I have no light whatever to throw on the subject. You see after all," added Annie Forest, raising her eyes to the clergyman's face, "it is impossible for you to believe me. Mrs. Willis does not believe me, and you cannot be expected to. I don't suppose you are to be blamed. I don't see how you can help yourself."

"The circumstantial evidence is very strong against you, Annie," replied the clergyman; "still, I promised to believe, and I have no intention of going back from my word. If, in the presence of God in this little church you would willingly and deliberately tell me a lie I should never trust human being again. No, Annie Forest, you have many faults, but you are not a liar. I see the impress of truth on your brow, in your eyes, on your lips. This is a very painful mystery, my child; but I believe you. I am going to see Mrs. Willis now. God bless you, Annie. Be brave, be courageous, don't foster malice in your heart to any unknown enemy. An enemy has truly done this thing, poor child; but God Himself will bring this mystery to light. Trust Him, my dear; and now I am going to see Mrs. Willis."

While Mr. Everard was speaking, Annie's whole expressive face had changed; the sullen look had left it; the eyes were bright with renewed hope; the lips had parted in smiles. There was a struggle for

speech, but no words came; the young girl stooped down and raised the old clergyman's withered hands to her lips.

"Let me stay here a little longer," she managed to say at last; and then he left her.

CHAPTER XVII.

"THE SWEETS ARE POISONED."

"I THINK, my dear madam," said Mr. Everard to Mrs. Willis, "that you must believe your pupil. She has not refused to confess to you from any stubbornness, but from the simple reason that she has nothing to confess. I am firmly convinced that things are as she stated them, Mrs. Willis. There is a mystery here which we neither of us can explain, but which we must unravel."

Then Mrs. Willis and the clergyman had a long and anxious talk together. It lasted for a long time, and some of its results at least were manifest the next morning, for, just before the morning's work began, Mrs. Willis came to the large schoolroom, and, calling Annie Forest to her side, laid her hand on the young girl's shoulder.

"I wish to tell you all, young ladies," she said, "that I completely and absolutely exonerate Annie Forest from having any part in the disgraceful occurrence which took place in this schoolroom a short time ago I allude, of course, as you all know, to the book which was found tampered with in Cecil Temple's desk. Some one else in this room is guilty, and the mystery has still to be unravelled, and the

guilty girl has still to come forward and declare herself. If she is willing at this moment to come to me here, and fully and freely confess her sin, I will quite forgive her."

The head mistress paused, and, still with her hand on Annie's shoulder, looked anxiously down the long room. The love and forgiveness which she felt shone in her eyes at this moment. No girl need have feared aught but tenderness from her just then.

No one stirred; the moment passed, and a look of sternness returned to the mistress's fine face.

"No," she said, in her emphatic and clear tones, "the guilty girl prefers waiting until God discovers her sin for her. My dear, whoever you are, that hour is coming, and you cannot escape from it. In the meantime, girls, I wish you all to receive Annie Forest as quite innocent. I believe in her, so does Mr. Everard, and so must you. Any one who treats Miss Forest except as a perfectly innocent and truthful girl incurs my severe displeasure. My dear, you may return to your seat."

Annie, whose face was partly hidden by her curly hair during the greater part of this speech, now tossed it back, and raised her brown eyes with a look of adoration in them to her teacher. Mrs. Willis's face, however, still looked harassed. Her eyes met Annie's, but no corresponding glow was kindled in them; their glance was just, calm, but cold.

The childish heart was conscious of a keen pang of agony, and Annie went back to her lessons without any sense of exultation.

The fact was this: Mrs. Willis's judgment and reason had been brought round by Mr. Everard's words, but in her heart of hearts, almost unknown to

herself, there still lingered a doubt of the innocence of her wayward and pretty pupil. She said over and over to herself that she really now quite believed in Annie Forest, but then would come those whisperings from her pained and sore heart.

"Why did she ever make a caricature of one who has been as a mother to her? If she made one caricature, could she not make another? Above all things, if *she* did not do it, who did?"

Mrs. Willis turned away from these unpleasant whispers—she would not let them stay with her, and turned a deaf ear to their ugly words. She had publicly declared in the school her belief in Annie's absolute innocence, but at the moment when her pupil looked up at her with a world of love and adoration in her gaze, she found to her own infinite distress that she could not give her the old love.

Annie went back to her companions, and bent her head over her lessons, and tried to believe that she was very thankful and very happy, and Cecil Temple managed to whisper a gentle word of congratulation to her, and at the twelve o'clock walk Annie perceived that a few of her schoolfellows looked at her with friendly eyes again. She perceived now that when she went into the playroom she was not absolutely tabooed, and that, if she chose, she might speedily resume her old reign of popularity. Annie had, to a remarkable extent, the gift of inspiring love, and her old favourites would quickly have flocked back to their sovereign had she so willed it. It is certainly true that the girls to whom the whole story was known in all its bearings found it difficult to understand how Annie could be innocent; but Mr. Everard's and Mrs. Willis's assertions were too potent

to be disregarded, and most of the girls were only too willing to let the whole affair slide from their minds, and to take back their favourite Annie to their hearts again.

Annie, however, herself did not so will it. In the playroom she fraternised with the little ones who were alike her friends in adversity and sunshine; she rejected almost coldly the overtures of her old favourites, but played, and romped, and was merry with the children of the sixth class. She even declined Cecil's invitation to come and sit with her in her drawing-room.

"Oh, no," she said. "I hate being still; I am in no humour for a talk. Another time, Cecil, another time. Now then, Sybil, my beauty, get well on my back, and I'll be the willing dog carrying you round and round the room."

Annie's face had not a trace of care or anxiety on it, but her eyes would not quite meet Cecil's, and Cecil sighed as she turned away, and her heart, too, began to whisper little, mocking, ugly doubts of poor Annie.

During the half-hour before tea that evening Annie was sitting on the floor with a small child in her lap, and two other little ones tumbling about her, when she was startled by a shower of lollipops being poured over her head, down her neck, and into her lap. She started up and met the sleepy gaze of Susan Drummond.

"That's to congratulate you, Miss," said Susan; "you're a very lucky girl to have escaped as you did."

The little ones began putting Susan's lollipops vigorously into their mouths. Annie sprang to her

feet, shaking the sticky sweetmeats out of her dress on to the floor.

"What have I escaped from?" she asked, turning round and facing her companion haughtily.

"Oh, dear me!" said Susan, stepping back a pace or two. "I—ah—" stifling a yawn—"I only meant you were very near getting into an ugly scrape. It's no affair of mine, I'm sure; only I thought you'd like the lollipops."

"No, I don't like them at all," said Annie, "nor you either. Go back to your own companions, please."

Susan sulkily walked away, and Annie stooped down on the floor.

"Now, little darlings," she said, "you mustn't eat those. No, no, they are not good at all; and they have come from one of Annie's enemies. Most likely they are full of poison. Let us collect them all, every one, and we will throw them into the fire before we go to tea."

"But I don't think there's any poison in them," said little Janie West in a regretful tone, as she gobbled down a particularly luscious chocolate cream; "they are all big, and fat, and bursty, and *so* sweet, Annie, dear."

"Never mind, Janie, they are dangerous sweeties all the same. Come, come, throw them into my apron, and I will run over and toss them into the fire, and we'll have time for a game of leap-frog before tea; oh, fie, Judy," as a very small fat baby began to whimper, "you would not eat the sweeties of one of Annie's enemies."

This last appeal was successful. The children made a valiant effort, and dashed the tempting

goodies into Annie's alpaca apron. When they were all collected, she marched up the playroom and in the presence of Susan Drummond, Hester Thornton, Cecil Temple, and several more of her school companions, threw them into the fire.

"So much for *that* overture, Miss Drummond," she said, making a mock curtsey, and returning once more to the children.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE HAMMOCK.

JUST at this time the weather suddenly changed. After the cold and dreariness of winter came soft spring days—came longer evenings and brighter mornings.

Hester Thornton found that she could dress by daylight, then that she was no longer cold and shivering when she reached the chapel, then that she began intensely to enjoy her mid-day walk, then that she found her winter things a little too hot, until at last, almost suddenly it seemed to the expectant and anxious girls, glorious spring weather broke upon the world, the winds were soft and westerly, the buds swelled and swelled into leaf on the trees, and the flowers bloomed in the delightful old-fashioned gardens of Lavender House. Instantly, it seemed to the girls, their whole lives had altered. The playroom was deserted or only put up with on wet days. At twelve o'clock, instead of taking a monotonous walk on the roads, they ran races, played tennis, croquet, or any other game they liked best in the

gardens. Later on in the day, when the sun was not so powerful, they took their walk ; but even then they had time to rush back to their beloved shady garden for a little time before tea and preparation for their next day's work. Easter came this year about the middle of April, and Easter found these girls almost enjoying summer weather. How they looked forward to their few Easter holidays ! what plans they made, what tennis matches were arranged, what games and amusements of all sorts were in anticipation ! Mrs. Willis herself generally went away for a few days at Easter ; so did the French governess, and the school was nominally placed under the charge of Miss Good and Miss Danesbury. Mrs. Willis did not approve of long Easter holidays ; she never gave more than a week, and in consequence only the girls who lived quite near went home. Out of the fifty girls who resided at Lavender House about ten went away at Easter ; the remaining forty stayed behind, and were often heard to declare that holidays at Lavender House were the most delightful things in the world.

At this particular Easter time the girls were rather surprised to hear that Mrs. Willis had made up her mind not to go away as usual ; Miss Good was to have a holiday, and Mrs. Willis and Miss Danesbury were to look after the school. This was felt to be an unusual, indeed unheard-of, proceeding, and the girls commented about it a good deal, and somehow, without absolutely intending to do so, they began to settle in their own minds that Mrs. Willis was staying in the school on account of Annie Forest, and that in her heart of hearts she did not absolutely believe in her innocence. Mrs. Willis certainly gave the girls no reason to come to this conclusion ; she was con-

sistently kind to Annie, and had apparently quite restored her to her old place in her favour. Annie was more gentle than of old, and less inclined to get into scrapes; but the girls loved her far less in her present unnatural condition of reserve and good behaviour than they did in her old daring and hoydenish days. Cecil Temple always spent Easter with an old aunt who lived in a neighbouring town; she openly said this year that she did not wish to go away, but her governess would not allow her to change her usual plans, and she left Lavender House with a curious feeling of depression and coming trouble. As she was getting into the cab which was to take her to the station Annie flew to her side, threw a great bouquet of flowers which she had gathered into her lap, and, flinging her arms tightly round her neck, whispered suddenly and passionately:

"Oh, Cecil, believe in me."

"I—I—I don't know that I don't," said Cecil, rather lamely.

"No, Cecil, you don't—not in your heart of hearts. Neither you nor Mrs. Willis—you neither of you believe in me from the very bottom of your hearts; oh, it is hard!"

Annie gave vent to a little sob, sprang away from Cecil's arms, and disappeared into a shrubbery close by.

She stayed there until the sound of the retreating cab died away in the avenue, then, tossing back her hair, rearranging her rather tattered garden hat, and hastily wiping some tears from her eyes, she came out from her retreat, and began to look around her for some amusement. What should she do? Where should she go? How should she occupy herself?

Sounds of laughter and merriment filled the air; the garden was all alive with gay young figures running here and there. Girls stood in groups under the horse chestnut tree—girls walked two and two up the shady walk at the end of the garden—little ones gambolled and rolled on the grass—a tennis match was going on vigorously, and the croquet ground was occupied by eight girls of the middle school. Annie was one of the most successful tennis players in the school; she had indeed a gift for all games of skill, and seldom missed her mark. Now she looked with a certain wistful longing towards the tennis-court; but, after a brief hesitation, she turned away from it and entered the shady walk at the farther end of the garden. As she walked along, slowly, meditatively, and sadly, her eyes suddenly lighted up. Glancing to one of the tall trees she saw a hammock suspended there which had evidently been forgotten during the winter. The tree was not yet quite in leaf, and it was very easy for Annie to climb up its branches, to re-adjust the hammock, and to get into it. After its winter residence in the tree this soft couch was found full of withered leaves, and otherwise rather damp and uncomfortable. Annie tossed the leaves on to the ground, and laughed as she swung herself gently backwards and forwards. Early as the season still was the sun was so bright and the air so soft that she could not but enjoy herself, and she laughed with pleasure, and only wished that she had a fairy tale by her side to help to soothe her off to sleep.

In the distance she heard some children calling "Annie," "Annie Forest;" but she was far too comfortable and too lazy to answer them, and presently she closed her eyes and really did fall asleep.

"TWO GIRLS . . . SAT UNDER THE OAK TREE IN WHICH ANNIE'S HAMMOCK SWUNG" (*p.* 119).

She was awakened by a very slight sound—by nothing more nor less than the gentle and very refined conversation of two girls, who sat under the oak tree in which Annie's hammock swung. Hearing the voices, she bent a little forward, and saw that the speakers were Dora Russell and Hester Thornton. Her first inclination was to laugh, toss down some leaves, and instantly reveal herself; the next she drew back hastily, and began to listen with all her ears.

"I never liked her," said Hester—"I never even from the very first pretended to like her. I think she is under-bred, and not fit to associate with the other girls in the schoolroom."

"She is treated with most unfair partiality," retorted Miss Russell in her thin and rather bitter voice. "I have not the smallest doubt, not the smallest, that she was guilty of putting those messes into my desk, of destroying my composition, and of caricaturing Mrs. Willis in Cecil Temple's book. I wonder after that Mrs. Willis did not see through her, but it is astonishing to what lengths favouritism will carry one. Mrs. Willis and Mr. Everard are behaving in a very unfair way to the rest of us in upholding this commonplace, disagreeable girl; but it will be to Mrs. Willis's own disadvantage. Hester, I am, as you know, leaving school at Midsummer, and I shall certainly use all my influence to induce my father and mother not to send the younger girls here; they could not associate with a person like Miss Forest."

"I never take much notice of her," said Hester; "but of course what you say is quite right, Dora. You have great discrimination, and your sisters might possibly be taken in by her."

"Oh, not at all, I assure you; they know a true lady when they see her. However, they must not be imperilled. I will ask my parents to send them to Mdlle. Lablanché. I hear that her establishment is most *recherché*."

"Mrs. Willis is very nice herself, and so are most of the girls," said Hester, after a pause. Then they were both silent, for Hester had stooped down to examine some little fronds and moss which grew at the foot of the tree. After a pause, Hester said—

"I don't think Annie is the favourite she was with the girls."

"Oh, of course not; they all, in their heart of hearts, know she is guilty. Will you come indoors, and have tea with me in my drawing-room, Hester?"

The two girls walked slowly away, and presently Annie let herself gently out of her hammock and dropped to the ground.

She had heard every word; she had not revealed herself, and a new and terrible—and, truth to say, absolutely foreign—sensation from her true nature now filled her mind. She felt that she almost hated those two who had spoken so cruelly, so unjustly of her. She began to trace her misfortunes and her unhappiness to the date of Hester's entrance into the school. Even more than Dora Russell did she dislike Hester; she made up her mind to revenge herself on both these girls. Her heart was very, very sore; she missed the old words, the old love, the old brightness, the old popularity; she missed the mother-tones in Mrs. Willis's voice—her heart cried out for them, at night she often wept for them. She became more and more sure that she owed all

her misfortunes to Hester, and in a smaller degree to Dora. Dora believed that she had deliberately insulted her, and injured her composition, when she knew herself that she was quite innocent of even harbouring such a thought, far less carrying it into effect. Well, now, she would really do something to injure both these girls, and perhaps the carrying out of her revenge would satisfy her sore heart.

CHAPTER XIX.

CUP AND BALL.

JUST towards the end of the Easter holidays, Hester Thornton was thrown into a great tumult of excitement, of wonder, of half regret and half joy, by a letter which she received from her father. In this letter he informed her that he had made up his mind to break up his establishment for several years, to go abroad, and to leave Hester altogether under Mrs. Willis's care.

When Hester had read so far, she flung her letter on the table, put her head into her hands, and burst into tears.

"Oh, how cruel of father!" she exclaimed; "how am I to live without ever going home—how am I to endure life without seeing my little Nan?"

Hester cried bitterly; the strongest love of her nature was now given to this pretty and sweet little sister, and dismal pictures rose rapidly before her of Nan growing up without in the least remembering her—perhaps, still worse, of Nan being unkindly

treated and neglected by strangers. After a long pause, she raised her head, wiped her eyes, and resumed her letter. Now, indeed, she started with astonishment, and gave an exclamation of delight—Sir John Thornton had arranged that Mrs. Willis was also to receive little Nan, although she was younger than any other child present in the school. Hester scarcely waited to finish her letter. She crammed it into her pocket, rushed up to Susan Drummond, and astonished that placid young lady by suddenly kissing her.

"Nan is coming, Susy!" she exclaimed; "dear, darling, lovely little Nan is coming—oh, I am so happy!"

She was far too impatient to explain matters to stolid Susan, and danced down-stairs, her eyes sparkling and smiles on her lips. It was nothing to her now how long she stayed at school—her heart's treasure would be with her there, and she could not but feel happy.

After breakfast Mrs. Willis sent for her, and told her what arrangements were being made; she said that she was going to remove Susan Drummond out of Hester's bedroom, in order that Hester might enjoy her little sister's company at night. She spoke very gently, and entered with full sympathy into the girl's delight over the little motherless sister, and Hester felt more drawn to her governess than she had ever been.

Nan was to arrive at Lavender House on the following evening, and for the first week her nurse was to remain with her until she got accustomed to her new life.

The morning of the day of Nan's arrival was also the last of the Easter holidays, and Hester, awakening

earlier than her wont, lay in bed, and planned what she would do to welcome the little one.

The idea of having Nan with her continually had softened and touched Hester. She was not unhappy in her school-life—indeed, there was much in its monotonous, busy, and healthy occupation to stimulate and rouse the good in her. Her intellect was being vigorously exercised, and, by contact with her school-fellows, her character was being moulded; but the perfect harmony and brightness of the school had been much interrupted since Hester's arrival; her dislike to Annie Forest had been unfortunate in more ways than one, and that dislike, which was increasing each day, was hardening Hester's heart.

But it was not hard this morning—all that was sweetest, and softest, and best in her had come to the surface—the little sister, whom her mother had left in her charge, was now to be her daily and hourly companion. For Nan's sake, then, she must be very good; her deeds must be gentle and kind, and her thoughts charitable. Hester had an instinctive feeling that baby eyes saw deep below the surface; Hester felt if Nan were to lose even a shadow of her faith in her she could almost die of shame.

Hester had been very proud of Dora Russell's friendship. Never before had it been known in the school that a first-class girl took a third into such close companionship, and Hester's little head had been slightly turned by the fact. Her better judgment and her better nature had been rather blinded by the fascinations of this tall, graceful, satirical Dora. She had been weak enough to agree with Dora with her lips when in her heart of hearts she knew she was all wrong. By nature Hester was an honourable girl,

with many fine traits in her character—by nature Dora was small and mean and poor of soul.

This morning Hester ran up to her favourite.

"Little Nan is coming to-night," she said.

Dora was talking at the moment to Miss Maitland, another first-class girl, and the two stared rather superciliously at Hester, and, after a pause, Dora said in her finest drawl—

"Who *is* little Nan?"

It was Hester's turn to stare, for she had often spoken of Nan to this beloved friend, who had listened to her narrative and had appeared to sympathise.

"My little sister, of course," she exclaimed. "I have often talked to you about her, Dora. Are you not glad she is coming?"

"No, my dear child, I can't say that I am. If you wish to retain my friendship, Hester, you must be careful to keep the little mite away from me; I can't bear small children."

Hester walked away with her heart swelling, and she fancied she heard the two elder girls laughing as she left the playroom.

Many other girls, however, in the school thoroughly sympathised with Hester, and amongst them no one was more delighted than Susan Drummond.

"I am awfully good-natured not to be as cross as two sticks, Hetty," she exclaimed, "for I am being turned out of my comfortable room; and whose room do you suppose I am now to share? why, that little imp Annie Forest's." But Hester felt charitable, even towards Annie, on this happy day.

In the evening little Nan arrived. She was a very pretty, dimpled, brown-eyed creature, of just three years of age. She had all the imperious ways of a

spoilt baby, and, evidently, fear was a word not to be found in her vocabulary. She clung to Hester, but smiled and nodded to the other girls, who made advances to her, and petted her, and thought her a very charming baby. Beside Nan, all the other little girls in the school looked old. She was quite two years the youngest, and it was soon very evident that she would establish that most imperious of all reigns —a baby reign—in the school.

Hester fondled her and talked to her, and the little thing sat on her knee and stroked her face.

"Me like 'oo, Hetty," she said several times, and she added many other endearing and pretty words which caused Hester's heart to swell with delight.

In the midst of their happy little talk together Annie Forest, in her usual careless fashion, entered the playroom. She alone, of all the girls, had taken no notice of the new plaything. She walked to her usual corner, sat down on the floor, and began to play cup and ball for the benefit of two or three of the smallest children. Hester did not regard her in the least; she sat with Nan on her knee, stroking back her sunny curls, and remarking on her various charms to several of the girls who sat round her.

"See, how pretty that dimple in her chin is," she said, "and oh, my pet, your eyes look wiser, and bigger, and saucier than ever. Look at me, Nan; look at your own Hetty."

Nan's attention, however, was diverted by the gaily-painted cup and ball which Annie was using with her wonted dexterity.

"Dat a pitty toy," she said, giving one quick and rather solemn glance at her sister, and again fixing her admiring gaze on the cup and ball.

Annie Forest had heard the words, and she darted a sudden, laughing look at the little one. Annie's power over children was well known. Nan began to wriggle on Hester's knee.

"Dat a pitty lady," she said again, "and that a pitty, tibby [little] toy; Nan go see."

"In an instant, before Hester could prevent her, she had trotted across the room, and was kneeling with the other children and shouting with delight over Annie's play.

"She'll get her, you'll see, Hester," said one of the girls maliciously; "she'll soon be much fonder of Annie Forest than of you. Annie wins the heart of every little child in the school."

"She won't win my Nan's from me," said Hester in a confident tone; but in spite of her words a great pang of jealousy had gone through her. She rose to her feet and followed her little sister.

"Nan, you are sleepy, you must go to bed."

"No, no, Hetty; me not s'eepy, me kite awake; go 'way, Hetty, Nan want to see the pitty tibby toy."

Annie raised her eyes to Hester's. She did not really want to be unkind, and at that moment it had certainly never entered into her head to steal Hester's treasure from her, but she could not help a look of suppressed delight and triumph filling her eyes.

Hester could scarcely bear the look; she stooped down, and taking one of Nan's little dimpled hands tried to drag her away.

Instantly Annie threw the cup and ball on the floor.

"The play is all over to-night, little darling," she said; "give Annie Forest one kiss, and run to bed with sister Hester."

Nan, who had been puckering up her face to cry, smiled instantly; then she scrambled to her feet, and flung her little fat arms round Annie's neck.

"Dat a vedy pitty p'ay," she said in a patronising tone, "and me like 'oo, me do."

Then she gave her hand willingly to Hester, and trotted out of the playroom by her side.

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE SOUTH PARLOUR.

IMMEDIATELY after Easter the real excitement of the school-year began. All the girls who had ambition, who had industry, and who had a desire to please distant fathers, mothers, or guardians, worked hard for that great day at Midsummer when Mrs. Willis distributed her valuable prizes.

From the moment of Hester's entrance into the school she had heard this day spoken of. It was, without doubt, the greatest day of the year at Lavender House. Smaller prizes were given at Christmas, but the great honours were always reserved for this long sunshiny June day, when Mrs. Willis herself presented her marks of approbation to her successful pupils.

The girls who had lived in the school for two or three years gave Hester vivid descriptions of the excitements, the pleasures, the delights of this day of days. In the first place it was the first of the holidays, in the second it was spent almost from morning to night in the open air—for a great tent was erected on the lawn; and visitors thronged to

Lavender House, and fathers and mothers, and aunts and uncles, arrived from a distance to witness the triumphs of the favoured children who had won the prizes. The giving away of the prizes was, of course, *the* event of the day; but there were many other minor joys. Always in the evenings there was some special entertainment. These entertainments differed from year to year, Mrs. Willis allowing the girls to choose them for themselves, and only making one proviso, that they must take all the trouble, and all the pains—in short, that they themselves must be the entertainers. One year they had tableaux vivants; another a fancy ball, every pretty dress of which had been designed by themselves, and many even made by their own industrious little fingers. Mrs. Willis delighted in the interest and occupation that this yearly entertainment gave to her pupils, and she not only encouraged them in their efforts to produce something very unique and charming, but took care that they should have sufficient time to work up their ideas properly. Always after Easter she gave the girls of the three first classes two evenings absolutely to themselves; and these they spent in a pretty room called the South Parlour, which belonged to Mrs. Willis's part of the house, and was rarely used, except for these great preparations.

Hester, therefore, after Easter found her days very full indeed. Every spare moment she devoted to little Nan, but she was quite determined to win a substantial prize, and she was also deeply interested in various schemes proposed in the South Parlour.

With regard to prizes, Mrs. Willis also went on a plan of her own. Each girl was expected to come

up to a certain standard of excellence in all her studies, and if she fell very much below this standard she was not allowed to try for any prize; if she came up to it, she could select one subject, but only one, for competition.

On the Monday after the Easter holidays the special subjects for the Midsummer prizes were given out, and the girls were expected to send in their answers as to the special prize they meant to compete for by the following Friday.

When this day arrived Hester Thornton and Dora Russell both discovered that they had made the same choice—they were going to try for the English composition prize. This subject always obtained one of the most costly prizes, and several of the girls shook their heads over Hester's choice.

"You are very silly to try for that, Hetty," they exclaimed, "for Mrs. Willis has such queer ideas with regard to English composition. Of course, we go in for it in a general way, and learn the rules of grammar and punctuation, and so forth, but Mrs. Willis says that school-girls' themes are so bad and affected, as a rule, and she says she does not think any one will go in for her pet prize who has not natural ability. In consequence, she gives only one prize for composition between the three first classes. You had better change your mind, Hetty, before it is too late, for much older girls will compete with you, and there are several who are going to try."

Hester, however, only smiled, and assured her eager friend that she would stick to her pet subject, and try to do the best she could.

On the morning when the girls signified their

choice of subject, Mrs. Willis came into the school-room and made one of her little yearly speeches with regard to the right spirit in which her girls should try for these honours. The few and well-chosen words of the head-mistress generally roused those girls who loved her best to a fever of enthusiasm, and even Hester, who was comparatively a new-comer, felt a great wish, as she listened to that clear and vibrating voice and watched the many expressions which passed over the noble face, that she might find something beyond the mere earthly honour and glory of success in this coming trial. Having finished her little speech, Mrs. Willis made several remarks with regard to the choice of subjects. She spoke of the English composition prize last, and here she heightened the interest and excitement which always hung around this special prize. Contrary to her usual rule, she would this year give no subject for an English theme. Each girl might choose what pleased her best.

On hearing these words Annie Forest, who had been sitting by her desk looking rather dull and dejected, suddenly sprang to her feet, her face aglow, her eyes sparkling, and began whispering vigorously to Miss Good.

Miss Good nodded, and, going up to Mrs. Willis, said aloud that Annie had changed her mind, and that from not wishing to try for any of the prizes, she now intended to compete for the English composition.

Mrs. Willis looked a little surprised, but without any comment she immediately entered Annie's name in the list of competitors, and Annie sat down again, not even glancing at her astonished schoolfellows, who could not conceal their amazement, for she had

never hitherto shown the slightest desire to excel in this department.

On the evening of this Friday the girls of the three first classes assembled for the first time in the South Parlour. Hitherto these meetings had been carried on in a systematic and business-like fashion. It was impossible for all the girls who belonged to these three large classes to assemble on each occasion. Careful selections, therefore, were, as a rule, made from their numbers. These girls formed a committee to superintend and carry on the real preparations for the coming treat, and the others only met when specially summoned by the committee to appear.

As usual now the three classes found themselves in the South Parlour—as usual they chattered volubly, and started schemes, to reject them again with peals of laughter. Many ideas were put forward, to be cast aside as utterly worthless. No one seemed to have any very brilliant thought, and as the first step on these occasions was to select what the entertainment should be, proceedings seemed to come to a standstill.

The fact was the most daring originator, the one whose ideas were always flavoured with a spice of novelty, was absolutely silent.

Cecil Temple, who had taken a seat near Annie, suddenly bent forward and spoke to her aloud.

"We have all said what we would like, and we none of us appear to have thought of anything at all worth having," she said; "but you have not spoken at all, Annie. Give us an idea, dear—you know you originated the fancy ball last year."

Thus publicly appealed to, Annie raised her full brown eyes, glanced at her companions, not one of

whom, with the exception of Cecil, returned her gaze fully; then, rising to her feet, she spoke in a slightly contemptuous tone.

"These preparations seem to me to be much ado about nothing; they take up a lot of our time, and the results aren't worth the trouble—I have nothing particular to say. Oh, well, yes, if you like—let's have blind man's buff and a magic lantern;" and then, dropping a mock curtsey to her companions, she dashed out of the South Parlour.

"Insufferable girl!" said Dora Russell; "I wonder you try to draw her out, Cecil. You know perfectly that we none of us care to have anything to do with her."

"I know perfectly that you are all doing your best to make her life miserable," said Cecil, suddenly and boldly. "No one in this school has obeyed Mrs. Willis's command to treat Annie as innocent—you are practically sending her to Coventry, and I think it is unjust and unfair. You don't know, girls, that you are ruining poor Annie's happiness."

"Oh, dear! she doesn't seem at all dull," said Miss West, a second class girl. "I do think she's a hardened little wretch."

"Little you know about her," said Cecil, the colour fading out of her pale face. Then, after a pause, she added, "The injustice of the whole thing is that in this treatment of Annie you break the spirit of Mrs. Willis's command—you, none of you, certainly tell her that she is guilty, but you treat her as such."

Here Hester Thornton said a daring thing.

"I don't believe Mrs. Willis in her heart of hearts considers Annie guiltless."

These words of Hester's were laughed at by most of the girls, but Dora Russell gave her an approving nod, and Cecil, looking paler than ever, dropped suddenly into her seat, and no longer tried to defend her absent friend.

"At any rate," said Miss Conway, who as the head girl of the whole school was always listened to with great respect, "it is unfortunate for the success of our entertainment that there should be all this discussion and bad feeling with regard to Miss Forest. For my own part, I cannot make out why the poor little creature should be hunted down, or what affair it is of ours whether she is innocent or not. If Mr. Everard and Mrs. Willis says she is innocent, is not that enough? The fact of her guilt or innocence can't hurt us one way or another. It is a great pity, however, for our own sakes, that we should be out with her now, for, whatever her faults, she is the only one of us who is ever gifted with an original thought. But, as we can't have her, let us set to work without her—we really can't waste the whole evening over this sort of talk."

Discussions as to the coming pleasure were now again resumed with vigour, and after a great deal of animated arguing it was resolved that two short plays should be acted; that a committee should be immediately formed, who should select the plays, and apportion their various parts to the different actors.

The committee selected included Miss Russell, Miss Conway, Hester Thornton, Cecil Temple, and two other girls of the second class. The conference then broke up, but there was a certain sense of flatness over everything, and Cecil was not the only girl

who sighed for the merry meetings of last year—when Annie had been the life and soul of all the proceedings, and when one brilliant idea after another with regard to the costumes for the fancy ball had dropped from her merry tongue.

CHAPTER XXI.

STEALING HEARTS

When Annie ran out of the South Parlour she found herself suddenly face to face with Mrs. Willis.

"Well, my dear child," said the head mistress in her kindest voice, "where are you running to? But I suppose I must not ask; you are, of course, one of the busy and secret conclave in the South Parlour?"

"No. I have left them," said Annie, bending her head, and after her usual habit when agitated, shaking her hair about her face.

"Left them?" repeated Mrs. Willis, "you mean, dear, that they have sent you for some message."

"No. I am not one of them. May I go into the garden, Mrs. Willis?"

"Certainly, my dear."

Annie did not even glance at her governess. She pushed aside the baize door, and found herself in the great stone hall which led to the playroom and schoolroom. Her garden hat hung on a peg in the hall, and she tossed it off its place, and holding it in her hand ran towards the side door which opened directly into the garden. She had a wild wish to get to the shelter of the forsaken hammock and there cry out her whole heart. The moment she got into the open air, however, she

was met by a whole troop of the little children, who were coming in after their usual short exercise before going to bed. Miss Danesbury was with them, and when Annie ran out by the open door, she entered holding two little ones by the hands. Last in this group toddled Hester's little sister Nan. The moment she saw Annie her little face broke into smiles; she held out two hands eagerly, and fled to the young girl's side.

"Where dat pitty toy?" she said, raising her round face to Annie's; "some one did buy dat toy, and it's vedy pitty, and me wants it—where's dat toy?"

Annie stooped down, and spoke suddenly and impulsively to the little child.

"You shall have the toy for your very own, Nan, if you will do something for me?"

Nan's baby eyes looked straight into Annie's.

"Me will," she said emphatically; "me want dat toy."

"Put your arms round me, little darling, and give me a great tight hug."

This request was great fun to Nan, who squeezed her little arms round Annie's neck, and pressed her dimpled cheek to her lips.

"Dere," she said triumphantly, "will dat do?"

"Yes, you little treasure, and you'll try to love me, won't you?"

"Me do," said Nan, in a solemn voice; but then Miss Danesbury called her, and she ran into the house.

As Nan trotted into the house she put up her dimpled hand to wipe something from her round cheek—it was a tear which Annie Forest had left there.

Annie herself, when all the little ones had disappeared, walked slowly and sadly down towards the shady walk. The sun had just set, and though it was now nearly May, and the evenings long, the wind was sufficiently cold to cause Annie to shiver in her thin house frock. At all times utterly fearless with regard to her health, she gave it no thought now, but entering the walk where she knew she should not be disturbed, she looked up at the hammock, and wondered whether she should climb into it. She decided, however, not to do so—the great and terrible weight of tears which had pressed close to her heart were relieved by Nan's embrace ; she no longer cared to cry until she could cry no longer—the worst of her pain had been soothed by the sweet baby graciousness of the little one.

Then there darted into poor Annie's sore heart and perplexed brain that dangerous thought and temptation which was to work so much future pain and trouble. She already loved little Nan, and Nan, as most children did, had taken a fancy to her. Annie stood still, and clasped her hands as the dark idea came to her to steal the heart of little Nan from Hester, and so revenge herself on her. By doing this she would touch Hester in her most vulnerable point—she would take from her what she valued most. The temptation came swiftly, and Annie listened to it, and thought how easy it would be to carry it into effect. She knew well that no little child could resist her when she chose to exercise her charms—it would be easy, easy work to make that part of Nan which was most precious all her own. Annie became fascinated by the idea ; how completely then she would have revenged all her wrongs on Hester! Some day Hester

would bitterly repent of her unjust prejudice towards her; some day Hester would come to her, and beg of her in agony to give her back her darling's love; ah! when that day came it would be her turn to triumph.

She felt more than satisfied as the temptation grew upon her; she shut out persistently from her view all the other side of the picture; she would not let herself think that the work she was about to undertake was cruel and mean. Hester had been more than unjust, and she was going to punish her.

Annie paced faster and faster up and down the shady walk, and whenever her resolution wavered, the memory of Hester's face as she had seen it the same night in the South Parlour came visibly back and strengthened it. Yes, her turn had come at last. Hester had contrived since her entrance into the school to make Annie's life thoroughly miserable. Well, never mind, it was Annie's turn now to make her wretched.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN BURN CASTLE WOOD.

IN concentrating her thoughts of revenge on Hester Annie ceased to trouble her head about Dora Russell. She considered Hester a crueller enemy than Dora. Hester belonged to her own set, worked in her own class, and would naturally, had things not turned out so unjustly, so unfairly, have been her friend, and not her enemy. Dora had nothing to say to Annie, and before Hester's advent into the school had scarcely noticed her existence. Annie therefore

concentrated all her powers on punishing Hester. This gave her an aim and an occupation, and at first she felt that her revenge might give her real pleasure.

Susan Drummond now shared Annie's bedroom, and Annie was rather startled one evening to hear this phlegmatic young person burst out into a strong tirade against Hester and Dora. Dora had managed, for some inexplicable reason, to offend Susan, and Susan now looked to Annie for sympathy, and boldly suggested that they should get up what she was pleased to call "a lark" between them for the punishment of this very dignified young lady.

Annie had never liked Susan, and she now stared at her, and said in her quick way—

"You won't catch me helping you in any of your larks. I've had trouble enough on that score as it is."

Susan gazed at her stupidly, and a dull red spread over her face.

"But I thought you hated Dora and Hester," she said—"I'm sure they hate you."

Annie was silent.

"You do hate them, don't you?" persisted Miss Drummond.

"It's nothing to you what I feel towards them, Susy," said Annie. "Please don't disturb me with any more of your chatter; I am very sleepy, and you are keeping me awake."

Thus silenced, Susan had to content herself by turning on her back, and going into the land of dreams; but she was evidently a good deal surprised and disappointed, and began to entertain a certain

respect, and even fear, of Annie which had been hitherto unknown to her.

Meanwhile Hester was very busy, very happy, and more satisfied—brighter and better employed than she had ever been in her life before. Nan's love satisfied the affectionate side of her nature, and all her intellect was strained to the utmost to win honours in the coming struggle.

She had stuck firmly to her resolve to work for the English composition prize, and she firmly made up her own mind to leave no stone unturned to win it, What affection she possessed for Miss Russell was not at all of a character to prevent her from thoroughly enjoying taking the prize out of her hands. Her love for Dora had been fed by vanity, and was not at all of a deep or noble character. She was some time carefully choosing the subject of her theme, and at last she resolved to write a brief historical description of the last days of Marie Antoinette. To write properly on this subject she had to read up a great deal, and had to find references in books which were not usually allowed as schoolroom property. Mrs. Willis, however, always allowed the girls who were working for the English composition prize to have access to her rather extensive library, and here Hester was often to be found during play-hours. Two evenings in the week were also taken up in preparation for the coming plays, and as Hester was to take rather an important part in one, and a small character in another, she was obliged to devote herself to getting up her parts during the weekly half-holidays. Thus every moment was busy, and, except at night, she had little time to devote herself to Nan.

Nan slept in a pretty crib in Hester's room, and each evening the young girl knelt down by her sister's side, and gazed at her with love which was almost motherly swelling in her breast.

All that was best of Hester was drawn out at these moments; something greater than ambition—something far and away above school triumphs and school jealousies spoke then in her heart of hearts. These moments found her capable of being both sympathising and forgiving; these moments followed out in her daily life might have made Hester almost great. Now was the time, with her eyes full of tears and her lips trembling with emotion, for Annie Forest to have caught a glimpse of the divine in Hester; the hardness, the pride, the haughty spirit were all laid aside, and hers was the true child-heart as she knelt by the sleeping baby. Hester prayed earnestly at these moments, and, in truth, Nan did better for her than any sermon; better for her than even Mrs. Willis's best influences. Nan was as the voice of God to her sister.

Hester, in her very busy life, had no time to notice, however, a very slight and almost imperceptible change in bright little Nan. In the mornings she was in too great a hurry to pay much heed to the little one's chatter; in the afternoons she had scarcely an instant to devote to her, and when she saw her playing happily with the other children she was quite content, and always supposed that when a spare half-hour did come in her busy life Nan would rush to her with the old ecstasy, and give her the old devotion.

One day, towards the end of a very fine May, the girls were all to go for a picnic to some woods about four miles away. They had looked forward for several

days to this relaxation, and were in the highest state of delight and the wildest spirits. After an early dinner they were to drive in several large waggonettes to the place of *rendezvous*, where they were to be regaled with gipsy-tea, and were to have a few hours in the lovely woods of Burn Castle, one of the show places of the neighbourhood. Mrs. Willis had invited the Misses Bruce to accompany them, and they were all to leave the house punctually at two o'clock. The weather was wonderfully fine and warm, and it was decided that all the children, even Nan, should go.

Perhaps none of the girls looked forward to this day's pleasure with greater joy than did Hester; she determined to make it a real holiday, and a real time of relaxation. She would forget her English theme; she would cease to worry herself about Marie Antoinette; she would cease to repeat her part in the coming play; and she would devote herself exclusively and determinately to Nan's pleasure. She pictured the little one's raptures; she heard her gay shouts of joy, her ceaseless little rippling chatter, her baby glee, and, above all things, her intense happiness at being with her own Hetty for the greater part of a whole day. Hester would ride her on her shoulder, would race with her; all her usual companions would be as nothing to her on this occasion, she would give herself up solely to Nan.

As she was dressing that morning she said a word or two to the child about the coming treat.

"We'll light a fire in the wood, Nan, and hang a kettle over it, and make tea—such good tea; won't it be nice?"

Nan clapped her hands. "And may I take out

my little ummabella (umbrella), case it might wain?" she asked, anxiously.

Hester flew to her and kissed her.

"You funny darling!" she said. "Oh, we shall have such a day! You'll be with your own Hetty all day long—your own Hetty; won't you be glad?"

"Me am," said Nan; "own Hetty, and own Annie; me am glad."

Hester scarcely heard the last words, for the prayer-gong sounded, and she had to fly down-stairs.

At dinner time the girls were discussing who would go with each, and all were very merry and full of fun.

"Miss Danesbury will take the little children," said Miss Good. "Mrs. Willis says that all the little ones are to be in Miss Danesbury's charge."

"Oh, please," said Hester, suddenly, "may Nan come with me, Miss Good? She'll be so disappointed if she doesn't, and I'll take such care of her."

Miss Good nodded a careless acquiescence, and Hester proceeded with her dinner, feeling thoroughly satisfied.

Immediately after dinner the girls flew to their rooms to prepare for their expedition. Hastily opening a drawer, Hester pulled out a white frock, white piqué pelisse, and washing hat for Nan—she meant her darling to look as charming as possible.

"Oh, dear, Miss Danesbury should have brought her here by now," she said to herself impatiently, and then, hearing the crunching of carriage wheels on the drive, she flew to the bell and rang it.

In a few moments one of the maids appeared.

"Do you know where Miss Nan is, Alice? She is

to go to Burn Castle with me, and I want to dress her, for it is nearly time to go."

Alice looked a little surprised.

"If you please, Miss," she said, "I think Miss Nan has just gone."

"What do you mean, Alice? Miss Good said especially she was to go with me."

"I know nothing about that, Miss; I only know that I saw Miss Forest carrying her down-stairs in her arms about three minutes ago, and they went off in the waggonette with all the other little children and Miss Danesbury."

Hester stood perfectly still, her colour changed from red to white; for full half a minute she was silent. Then, hearing voices from below calling to her, she said in a cold, quiet tone—

"That will do, Alice; thank you for letting me know."

She turned to her drawer and put back Nan's white and pretty things, and also replaced a new and very becoming shady hat which she had meant to wear herself. In her old winter hat, and looking almost untidy for her, she walked slowly down-stairs and took her place in the waggonette which was drawn up at the door.

Cecil Temple and one or two other girls whom Hester liked very much were in the same waggonette, but she scarcely cared to talk to them, and only joined in their laughter by a strong effort. She was deeply wounded, but her keenest present desire was to hide any feelings of jealousy she had towards Annie from the quick eyes of her schoolfellows.

"Why," suddenly exclaimed Julia Morris, a particularly unobservant girl, "I thought you were going

to bring that dear baby sister with you, Hester. Oh, I do hope there is nothing the matter with her."

"Nan has gone on in the first waggonette with the little children," said Hester as cheerfully as she could speak, but she coloured slightly, and saw that Cecil was regarding her attentively.

Susan Drummond exclaimed suddenly—

"I saw Annie Forest rushing down the stairs with little Nan, and Nan had her arms round her neck, and was laughing merrily. You need not be anxious about Nan, Hester; she was quite content to go with Annie."

"I did not say I was anxious," replied Hester in a cold voice. "How very beautiful that avenue of beech trees is, Cecil!"

"But Annie heard Miss Good say that you were to take Nan," persisted Julia Morris. "She could not but have noticed it, for you did flush up so, Hester, and looked so eager. I never saw any one more in earnest about a trifle in my life; it was impossible for Annie not to have heard."

"The great thing is that Nan is happy," said Hester in a fretted voice. "Do let us change the subject, girls."

Cecil instantly began talking about the coming plays, and soon the conversation became of an absorbing character, and Hester's voice was heard oftener than the others, and she laughed more frequently than her companions.

For all this forced merriment, however, Cecil did not fail to observe that when Hester got to the place of meeting at Burn Castle she looked around her with a quick and eager glance. Then the colour faded from her face, and her eyes grew dim.

That look of pain on Hester's face was quite enough for kind-hearted Cecil. She had thrown herself on the grass with an exclamation of delight, but in an instant she was on her feet.

"Now, of course, the first thing is to find little Nan," she said; "she'll be missing you dreadfully, Hetty."

Cecil held out her hand to Hester to run with her through the wood, but, to her surprise, Hester drew back.

"I'm tired," she said; "I daresay we shall find Nan presently. She is sure to be safe, as she is under Miss Danesbury's care."

Cecil made no remark, but set off by herself to find the little children. Presently, standing on a little knoll, and putting her two hands round her lips, so as to form a speaking trumpet, she shouted to Hester. Hester came slowly and apparently unwillingly towards her, but when she got to the foot of the knoll, Cecil flew down, and, taking her by the hand, ran with her to the top.

"Oh, do come quick!" she exclaimed; "it is such a pretty sight."

Down in the valley about fifty yards away were the ten or twelve little children who formed the infant portion of the school. Miss Danesbury was sitting at some distance off quietly reading, and the children, decked with flowers, and carrying tall grasses and reeds in their hands, were flying round and round in a merry circle, while in their midst, and the centre of attraction, stood Annie, whose hat was tossed aside, and whose bright, curling hair was literally crowned with wild flowers. On Annie's shoulder stood little Nan, carefully and beautifully

poised, and round Nan's wavy curls was a starry wreath of wood-anemones. Nan was shouting gleefully and clapping her hands, while Annie balanced her slightest movement with the greatest agility, and kept her little feet steady on her shoulders with scarcely an effort. As the children ran round and round Annie she waltzed gracefully backwards and forwards to meet them, and they all sang snatches of nursery rhymes. When Cecil and Hester appeared they had reached in their varied collection—

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall."

Here Nan exclaimed, in her clear, high-pitched voice—

"Me no fall, Annie," and the small children on the ground clapped their hands and blew kisses to her.

"Isn't it pretty? Isn't Annie sweet with children?" said Cecil, looking round to Hester with all the admiration she felt for her friend shining in her face. The expression, however, which Hester wore at that moment really startled Cecil; she was absolutely colourless, and presently she called aloud in a harsh, strained voice—

"Be careful of her! How wicked of you to put her like that on your shoulder! She will fall—yes, I know she will fall; oh, do be careful!"

Hester's voice startled the children, who ceased singing and dancing; Annie made a hasty step forward, and one little voice alone kept singing out the words—

"Humpty-Dumpty got a great fall!"—

when there was a crash and a cry, and Nan, in some

inexplicable way, had fallen backwards from Annie's shoulders.

In one instant Hester was in the midst of the group.

"Don't touch her," she said, as Annie flew to pick up the child, who, falling with some force on her head, had been stunned; "don't touch her—don't dare! It was your doing; you did it on purpose—you wished to do it!"

"You are unjust," said Annie, in a low tone. "Nan was perfectly safe until you startled her. Like all the rest you are unjust. Nan would have come to no harm if you had not spoken."

Hester did not vouchsafe another word. She sat on the ground with the unconscious and pretty little flower-crowned figure laid across her lap; she was terrified, and thought in her inexperience that Nan must be dead.

At the first mention of the accident Cecil had flown to fetch some water, and when she and Miss Danesbury applied it to little Nan's temples, she presently sighed, and opened her brown eyes wide.

"I hope—I trust she is not much hurt," said Miss Danesbury; "but I think it safest to take her home at once. Cecil, dear, can you do anything about fetching a waggonette round to the stile at the entrance of the wood? Now, the puzzle is, who is to take care of the rest of the little children? If only they were under Miss Good's care, I should breathe more easily."

"I am going home with Nan," said Hester, in a hard voice.

"Of course, my love; no one would think of parting you from your little sister," said the governess soothingly.

"If you please, Miss Danesbury," said Annie, whose face was quite as pale as Hester's, and her eyes heavy as though she longed to cry, "will you trust me with the little ones? If you do, I will promise to take them straight to Miss Good, and to be most careful of them."

Miss Danesbury's gentle and kind face looked relieved.

"Thank you, Annie—of course I trust you, dear. Take the children at once to the meeting-place under the great oak, and wait there until Miss Good appears."

Annie suddenly sprang forward, and threw her arms round Miss Danesbury's neck.

"Miss Danesbury, you comfort me," she said, in a kind of stifled voice, and then she ran off with the children.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"HUMPTY-DUMPTY HAD A GREAT FALL."

ALL the stupor and languor which immediately followed Nan's fall passed off during her drive home; she chatted and laughed, her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright. Hester turned with a relieved face to Miss Danesbury.

"My little darling is all right, is she not?" she said. "Oh, I was so terrified—oh, how thankful I am no harm has been done!"

Miss Danesbury did not return Hester's full gaze; she attempted to take little Nan on her knee, but Nan clung to Hetty. Then she said—

"You must be careful to keep the sun off her

dear—hold your parasol well down—just so. That is better. When we get home, I will put her to bed at once. Please God, there *is* nothing wrong; but one cannot be too careful."

Something in Miss Danesbury's manner affected Hester strangely; she clasped Nan's slight baby form closer and closer to her heart, and no longer joined in the little one's mirth. As the drive drew to a close, Nan again ceased talking, and fell into a heavy sleep.

Miss Danesbury's face grew graver and graver, and, when the waggonette drew up at Lavender House, she insisted on lifting the sleeping child out of Hester's arms, and carrying her up to her little crib. When Nan's little head was laid on the cool pillow, she again opened her eyes, and instantly asked for a drink. Miss Danesbury gave her some milk and water, but the moment she drank it she was sick.

"Just as I feared," said the governess; "there is some little mischief—not much, I hope—but we must instantly send for the doctor."

As Miss Danesbury walked across the room to ring the bell, Hester followed her.

"She's not in danger?" she whispered in a hoarse voice; "if she is, Annie is guilty of murder."

"Don't, my dear," said the governess; "you must keep quiet for Nan's sake. Please God, she will soon be better. All I really apprehend is a little excitement and feverishness, which will pass off in a few days with care. Hester, my dear, I suddenly remember that the house is nearly empty, for all the servants are also enjoying a holiday. I think I must send you for Dr. Mayflower. The waggonette is still at the door. Drive at once to town, my dear, and ask the

coachman to take you to No. 10, The Parade. If you are very quick, you will catch Dr. Mayflower before he goes out on his afternoon rounds."

Hester glanced for half an instant at Nan, but her eyes were again closed.

"I will take the best care of her," said the governess in a kind voice; "don't lose an instant, dear."

Hester snatched up her hat and flew downstairs. In a moment she was in the waggonette, and the driver was speedily urging his horses in the direction of the small town of Sefton, two miles and a half away. Hester was terrified now—so terrified, in such an agony, that she even forgot Annie; her hatred towards Annie became of secondary importance to her. All her ideas, all her thoughts, were swallowed up in the one great hope—Should she be in time to reach Dr. Mayflower's house before he set off on his afternoon rounds? As the waggonette approached Sefton she buried her face in her hands and uttered a sharp inward cry of agony.

"Please God, let me find the doctor!" It was a real prayer from her heart of hearts. The waggonette drew up at the doctor's residence, to discover him stepping into his brougham. Hester was a shy child, and had never seen him before; but she instantly raised her voice, and almost shouted to him—

"You are to come with me; please you are to come at once. Little Nan is ill—she is hurt. Please, you are to come at once."

"Eh! young lady?" said the round-faced doctor. "Oh! I see; you are one of the little girls from Lavender House. Is anything wrong there dear?"

Hester managed to relate what had occurred;

whereupon the doctor instantly opened the door of the waggonette.

"Jump out, young lady," he said; "I will drive you back in my brougham. Masters," addressing his coachman, "to Lavender House."

Hester sat back in the soft-cushioned carriage, which bowled smoothly along the road. It seemed to her impatience that the pace at which they went was not half quick enough—she longed to put her head out of the window to shout to the coachman to go faster. She felt intensely provoked with the doctor, who sat placidly by her side reading a newspaper.

Presently she saw that his eyes were fixed on her. He spoke in his quietest tones.

"We always take precisely twenty minutes to drive from the Parade to Lavender House—twenty minutes, neither more nor less. We shall be there now in exactly ten minutes."

Hester tried to smile, but failed; her agony of apprehension grew and grew. She breathed more freely when they turned into the avenue. When they stopped at the wide stone porch, and the doctor got out, she uttered a sigh of relief. She took Dr. Mayflower herself up to Nan's room. Miss Danesbury opened the door, the doctor went inside, and Hester crouched down on the landing and waited. It seemed to her that the good physician would never come out. When he did she raised a perfectly blanched face to his, she opened her lips, tried to speak, but no words would come. Her agitation was so intense that the kind-hearted doctor took instant pity on her.

"Come into this room, my child," he said. "My

dear, you will be ill yourself if you give way like this. Pooh! pooh! this agitation is extreme—is uncalled for. You have got a shock. I shall prescribe a glass of sherry at once. Come downstairs with me, and I will see that you get one."

"But how is she, sir—how is she?" poor Hester managed to articulate.

"Oh! the little one—sweet, pretty, little darling. I did not know she was your sister—a dear little child. She got an ugly fall, though—came on a nasty place."

"But, please, sir, how is she? She—she—she is not in danger?"

"Danger? by no means, unless you put her into it. She must be kept very quiet, and, above all things, not excited. I will come to see her again to-morrow morning. With proper care she ought to be quite herself in a few days. Ah! now you've got a little colour in your cheek, come down with me and have that glass of sherry, and you will feel all right."

CHAPTER XXIV.

ANNIE TO THE RESCUE.

THE picnic-party arrived home late. The accident to little Nan had not shortened the day's pleasure, although Mrs. Willis, the moment she heard of it, had come back; for she entered the hall just as the doctor was stepping into his carriage. He gave her his opinion, and said that he trusted no further mischief, beyond a little temporary excitement, had been caused. He again, however, spoke of the

great necessity of keeping Nan quiet, and said that her schoolfellows must not come to her, and that she must not be excited in any way. Mrs. Willis came into the great hall where Hester was standing. Instantly she went up to the young girl, and put her arm around and drew her to her side.

"Darling," she said, "this is a grievous anxiety for you; no words can express my sorrow and my sympathy; but the doctor is quite hopeful, Hester, and, please God, we shall soon have the little one as well as ever."

"You are really sorry for me?" said Hester, raising her eyes to the head-mistress's face.

"Of course, dear; need you ask?"

"Then you will have that wicked Annie Forest punished—well punished—well punished."

"Sometimes, Hester," said Mrs. Willis very gravely, "God takes the punishment of our wrong-doings into His own hands. Annie came home with me. Had you seen her face as we drove together you would not have asked *me* to punish her."

"Unjust, always unjust," muttered Hester, but in so low a voice that Mrs. Willis did not hear the words. "Please may I go to little Nan?" she said.

"Certainly, Hester—some tea shall be sent up to you presently."

Miss Danesbury arranged to spend that night in Nan's room. A sofa bed was brought in for her to lie on, for Mrs. Willis had yielded to Hester's almost feverish entreaties that she might not be banished from her little sister. Not a sound reached the room where Nan was lying—even the girls took off their shoes as they passed

the door—not a whisper came to disturb the sick child. Little Nan slept most of the evening, only sometimes opening her eyes and looking up drowsily when Miss Danesbury changed the cold application to her head. At nine o'clock there came a low tap at the room door. Hester went to open it; one of her schoolfellows stood without.

"The prayer-gong is not to be sounded to-night. Will you come to the chapel now? Mrs. Willis sent me to ask."

Hester shook her head.

"I cannot," she whispered; "tell her I cannot come."

"Oh, I am so sorry!" replied the girl; "is Nan very bad?"

"I don't know; I hope not. Good-night."

Hester closed the room-door, took off her dress, and began very softly to prepare to get into bed. She put on her dressing-gown, and knelt down as usual to her private prayers. When she got on her knees, however, she found it impossible to pray; her brain felt in a whirl, her feelings were unprayerlike; and with the temporary relief of believing Nan in no immediate danger came such a flood of hatred towards Annie as almost frightened her. She tried to ask God to make Nan better—quite well; but even this petition seemed to go no way—to reach no one—to fall flat on the empty air. She rose from her knees, and got quietly into bed.

Nan lay in that half-drowsy and languid state until midnight. Hester, with all her very slight experience of illness, thought that as long as Nan was quiet she must be getting better; but Miss

Danesbury was by no means so sure, and, notwithstanding the doctor's verdict, she felt anxious about the child. Hester had said that she could not sleep; but at Miss Danesbury's special request she got into bed, and before she knew anything about it was in a sound slumber. At midnight, when all the house was quiet, and Miss Danesbury kept a lonely watch by the sick child's pillow, there came a marked change for the worse in the little one. She opened her feverish eyes wide and began to call out piteously; but her cry now was, not for Hester, but for Annie.

"Me want my Annie," she said over and over, "me do, me do. No, no; go 'way, naughty Daybury, me want my Annie; me do want her."

Miss Danesbury felt puzzled and distressed. Hester, however, was awakened by the piteous cry, and sat up in bed.

"What is it, Miss Danesbury?" she asked.

"She is very much excited, Hester; she is calling for Annie Forest."

"Oh, that is quite impossible," said Hester, a shudder passing through her. "Annie can't come here. The doctor specially said that none of the girls were to come near Nan."

"Me want Annie; me want my own Annie," wailed the sick child.

"Give me my dressing-gown, please, Miss Danesbury, and I will go to her," said Hester.

She sprang out of bed, and approached the little crib. The brightness of Nan's feverish eyes was distinctly seen. She looked up at Hester, who bent over her; then she uttered a sharp cry and covered her little face.

"Go 'way, go 'way, naughty Hetty—Nan want Annie; Annie sing, Annie p'ay with Nan—go 'way, go 'way, Hetty."

Hester's heart was too full to allow her to speak; but she knelt by the crib and tried to take one of the little hot hands in hers. Nan, however, pushed her hands away, and now began to cry loudly.

"Annie!—Annie!—Annie! me want 'oo; Nan want 'oo—poor tibby Nan want 'oo, Annie!"

Miss Danesbury touched Hester on her shoulder.

"My dear," she said, "the child's wish must be gratified. Annie has an extraordinary power over children, and under the circumstances I shall take it upon me to disobey the doctor's directions. The child must be quieted at all hazards. Run for Annie, dear—you know her room. I had better stay with little Nan, for, though she loves you best, you don't soothe her at present—that is often so with a fever case."

"One moment," said Hester. She turned again to the little crib.

"Hetty is going to fetch Annie for Nan. Will Nan give her own Hetty one kiss?"

Instantly the little arms were flung round Hester's neck.

"Me like 'oo now, dood Hetty. Go for Annie, dood Hetty."

Instantly Hester ran out of the room. She flew quickly down the long passage, and did not know what a strange little figure she made as the moon from a large window at one end fell full upon her. So eerie, so ghost-like was her appearance as she flew noiselessly with her bare feet along the passage that some one—Hester did not know whom—gave a

stifled cry. The cry seemed to come from a good way off, and Hester was too preoccupied to notice it. She darted into the room where Susan Drummond and Annie Forest slept.

"Annie, you are to come to Nan," she said in a sharp high-pitched voice which she scarcely recognised as her own.

"Coming," said Annie, and she walked instantly to the door with her dress on, and stood in the moonlight.

"You are dressed!" said Hester in astonishment.

"I could not undress—I lay down as I was. I fancied I heard Nan's voice calling me. I guessed I should be sent for."

"Well, come now," said Hester in her hardest tones. "You were only sent for because Nan must be quieted at any risk. Come, and see if you can quiet her. I don't suppose," with a bitter laugh, "that you will succeed."

"I think so," replied Annie, in a very soft and gentle tone.

She walked back by Hester's side and entered the sick room. She walked straight up to the little cot, and knelt down by Nan, and said, in that strangely melodious voice of hers—

"Little darling, Annie has come."

"Me like 'oo," said Nan, with a satisfied coo in her voice, and she turned round on her side, with her back to Miss Danesbury and Hester, and her eyes fixed on Annie.

"Sing 'Four-and-twenty,' Annie; sing 'Four-and-twenty,'" she said presently.

"Four-and-twenty blackbirds baked in a pie," sang Annie in a low clear voice, without a moment's

hesitation. She went through the old nursery rhyme once—twice. Then Nan interrupted her fretfully—

"Me don't want dat 'dain; sing 'Boy Blue,' Annie."

Annie sang.

"'Tree Little Kittens,' Annie," interrupted the little voice presently.

For more than two hours Annie knelt by the child, singing nursery rhyme after nursery rhyme, while the bright beautiful eyes were fixed on her face, and the little voice said incessantly—

"Sing, Annie—sing."

"Baby Bun, now," said Nan, when Annie had come almost to the end of her selection.

"Bye baby bunting,
Daddy's gone a-hunting—
He's gone to fetch a rabbit-skin,
To place the baby bunting in."

Over and over and over did Annie sing the words. Whenever, even for a brief moment she paused, Nan said—

"Sing, Annie—sing 'Baby Bun.'"

And all the time the eyes remained wide open, and the little hands were burning hot; but, gradually, after more than two hours of constant singing, Annie began to fancy that the burning skin was cooler, Then—could she believe it?—she saw the lids droop over the wide-open eyes. Five minutes later, to the tune of 'Baby Bunting,' Nan had fallen into a deep and sound sleep.

CHAPTER XXV.

A SPOILT BABY.

IN the morning Nan was better, and although for days she was in a very precarious state, and had to be kept as quiet as possible, yet Miss Danesbury's great dread that fever would set in had passed away. The doctor said, however, that Nan had barely escaped real injury to her brain, and that it would be many a day before she would romp again, and play freely and noisily with the other children. Nan had chosen her own nurse, and, with the imperiousness of all babies—to say nothing of sick babies—she had her way. From morning till night Annie remained with her, and when the doctor saw how Annie alone could soothe and satisfy the child he would not allow it to be otherwise. At first Nan would lie with her hand in Annie's, and her little cry of "Sing, Annie," going on from time to time; but as she grew better Annie would sit with her by the open window, with her head pillowed on her breast, and her arm round the little slender form, and Nan would smile and look adoringly at Annie, who would often return her gaze with intense sadness, and an indescribable something in her face which caused the little one to stroke her cheek tenderly, and say in her sweet baby voice—

"Poor Annie; poor tibby Annie!"

They made a pretty picture as they sat there. Annie, with her charming gipsy face, her wild, luxuriant, curly hair, all the sauciness and unrest in her soothed by the magic of the little child's presence;

and the little child herself, with her faint wild-rose colour, her dark deep eyes, clear as summer pools, and her sunshiny golden hair. But pretty as the picture was Hester loathed it, for Hester thought during these wretched days that her heart would break.

Not that Nan turned away from Hetty; she petted her and kissed her, and sometimes put an arm round Hetty and an arm round Annie, as though, if she could, she would draw them together; but any one could see that her heart of hearts was given to Annie, and that Hester ranked second in her love. Hester would not for worlds express any of her bitter feelings before Annie; nay, as the doctor and Miss Danesbury both declared that, however culpable Annie might have been in causing the accident, she had saved little Nan's life by her wonderful skill in soothing her to sleep on the first night of her illness, Hester had felt obliged to grumble something which might have been taken for "thanks."

Annie, in reply to this grumble, had bestowed upon Hester one of her quickest, brightest glances, for she fathomed the true state of Hester's heart towards her well enough.

These were very bad days for poor Hester, and but for the avidity with which she threw herself into her studies she could scarcely have borne them.

By slow degrees Nan got better; she was allowed to come downstairs and to sit in Annie's arms in the garden, and then Mrs. Willis interfered, and said that Annie must go back to her studies, and only devote her usual play hours and half-holidays to Nan's service.

This mandate, however, produced woe and tribulation. The spoilt child screamed and beat her little hands, and worked herself up into such a pitch of

excitement that that night she found her way in her sleep to Annie's room, and Annie had to quiet her by taking her into her bed. In the morning the doctor had to be sent for, and he instantly prescribed a day or two more of Annie's company for the child.

Mrs. Willis felt dreadfully puzzled. She had undertaken the charge of the little one; her father was already far away, so it was impossible now to make any change of plans; the child was ill—had been injured by an accident caused by Annie's carelessness and by Hester's want of self-control. But weak and ill as Nan still was, Mrs. Willis felt that an undue amount of spoiling was good for no one. She thought it highly unjust to Annie to keep her from her school employments at this most important period of the year. If Annie did not reach a certain degree of excellence in her school marks she could not be promoted in her class. Mrs. Willis did not expect the wild and heedless girl to carry off any special prizes; but her abilities were quite up to the average, and she always hoped to rouse sufficient ambition in her to enable her to acquire a good and sound education. Mrs. Willis knew how necessary this was for poor Annie's future, and, after giving the doctor an assurance that Nan's whims and pleasures should be attended to for the next two or three days, she determined at the end of that time to assert her own authority with the child, and to insist on Annie working hard at her lessons, and returning to her usual schoolroom life.

On the morning of the third day Mrs. Willis made inquiries, heard that Nan had spent an excellent night, eaten a hearty breakfast, and was altogether looking blooming. When the girls assembled in the schoolroom for their lessons, Annie brought her little charge

down to the large playroom, where they established themselves cosily, and Annie began to instruct little Nan in the mysteries of—

> "Tic, tac, too,
> The little horse has lost his shoe."

Nan was entering into the spirit of the game, was imagining herself a little horse, and was holding out her small foot to be shod, when Mrs. Willis entered the room.

"Come with me, Nan," she said; "I have got something to show you."

Nan got up instantly, held out one hand to Mrs. Willis and the other to Annie, and said, in her confident baby tones—

"Me tum; Annie tumming too."

Mrs. Willis said nothing, but, holding the little hand, and accompanied by Annie, she went out of the playroom, across the stone hall, and through the baize doors until she reached her own delightful private sitting-room.

There were heaps of pretty things about, and Nan gazed round her with the appreciative glance of a pleased connoisseur.

"Pitty 'oom," she said approvingly. "Nan likes this 'oom. Me'll stay here, and so will Annie."

Here she uttered a sudden cry of rapture—on the floor, with its leaves temptingly open, lay a gaily-painted picture-book, and curled up in a soft fluffy ball by its side was a white Persian kitten asleep.

Mrs. Willis whispered something to Annie, who ran out of the room, and Nan knelt down in a perfect rapture of worship by the kitten's side.

"Pitty tibby pussy!" she exclaimed several times,

and she rubbed it so persistently the wrong way that the kitten shivered and stood up, arched its back very high, yawned, turned round three times, and lay down again. Alas! "tibby pussy" was not allowed to have any continuous slumber. Nan dragged the Persian by its tail into her lap, and when it resisted this indignity, and with two or three light bounds disappeared out of the room, she stretched out her little hands and began to cry for it.

"'Tum back, puss, puss—tum back, poor tibby puss—Nan loves 'oo. Annie, go fetch puss for Nan." Then for the first time she discovered that Annie was absent, and that she was alone, with the exception of Mrs. Willis, who sat busily writing at a distant table.

Mrs. Willis counted for nothing at all with Nan—she did not consider her of the smallest importance, and after giving her a quick glance of some disdain she began to trot round the room on a voyage of discovery. Any moment Annie would come back—Annie had, indeed, probably gone to fetch the kitten, and would quickly return with it. She walked slowly round and round, keeping well away from that part of the room where Mrs. Willis sat. Presently she found a very choice little china jug, which she carefully substracted with her small fingers from a cabinet, which contained many valuable treasures. She sat down on the floor exactly beneath the cabinet, and began to play with her jug. She went through in eager pantomime a little game which Annie had invented for her, and imagined that she was a little milkmaid, and that the jug was full of sweet new milk; she called out to an imaginary set of purchasers, "Want any milk?" and then she poured some by way of drops of milk into the palm of her little hand,

which she drank up in the name of her customers with considerable gusto. Presently, knocking the little jug with some vehemence on the floor she deprived it with one neat blow of its handle and spout. Mrs. Willis was busily writing, and did not look up. Nan was not in the least disconcerted; she said aloud—

"Poor tibby zug b'oke," and then she left the fragments on the floor, and started off on a fresh voyage of discovery. This time she dragged down a large photographic album on to a cushion, and, kneeling by it, began to look through the pictures, flapping the pages together with a loud noise, and laughing merrily as she did so. She was now much nearer to Mrs. Willis, who was attracted by the sound, and looking up hastened to the rescue of one of her most precious collections of photographs.

"Nan, dear," she said, "shut up that book at once. Nan mustn't touch. Shut the book, darling, and go and sit on the floor, and look at your nice-coloured pictures."

Nan, still holding a chubby hand between the leaves of the album, gave Mrs. Willis a full defiant glance, and said—

"Me won't."

"Come, Nan," said the head-mistress.

"Me want Annie," said Nan, still kneeling by the album, and, bending her head over the photographs, she turned the page and burst into a peal of laughter.

"Pitty bow vow," she said, pointing to a photograph of a retriever; "oh, pitty bow woo, Nan loves 'oo."

Mrs. Willis stooped down and lifted the little girl into her arms.

"Nan, dear," she said, "it is naughty to disobey. Sit down by your picture-book, and be a good girl."

"Me won't," said Nan again, and here she raised her small dimpled hand and gave Mrs. Willis a smart slap on her cheek.

"Naughty lady, me don't like 'oo; go 'way. Nan want Annie—Nan do want Annie. Me don't love 'oo, naughty lady; go 'way."

Mrs. Willis took Nan on her knee. She felt that the little will must be bent to hers, but the task was no easy one. The child scarcely knew her, she was still weak and excitable, and she presently burst into storms of tears, and sobbed and sobbed as though her little heart would break, her one cry being for "Annie, Annie, Annie." When Annie did join her in the play hour, the little cheeks were flushed, the white brow ached, and the child's small hands were hot and feverish. Mrs. Willis felt terribly puzzled.

CHAPTER XXVI.

UNDER THE LAUREL BUSH.

Mrs. Willis owned to herself that she was nonplussed; it was quite impossible to allow Annie to neglect her studies, and yet little Nan's health was still too precarious to allow her to run the risk of having the child constantly fretted.

Suddenly a welcome idea occurred to her: she would write at once to Nan's old nurse, and see if she could come to Lavender House for the remainder of the present term. Mrs. Willis dispatched her letter that very day, and by the following evening the nurse

was once more in possession of her much-loved little charge. The habits of her babyhood were too strong for Nan; she returned to them gladly enough, and though in her heart of hearts she was still intensely loyal to Annie, she no longer fretted when she was not with her.

Annie resumed her ordinary work, and though Hester was very cold to her, several of the other girls in the school frankly confided to their favourite how much they had missed her, and how glad they were to have her back with them once more.

Annie found herself at this time in an ever-shifting mood—one moment she longed intensely for a kiss, and a fervent pardon from Mrs. Willis's lips; another, she said to herself defiantly she could and would live without it; one moment the hungry and sorrowful look in Hester's eyes went straight to Annie's heart, and she wished she might restore her little treasure whom she had stolen; the next she rejoiced in her strange power over Nan, and resolved to keep all the love she could get.

In short, Annie was in that condition when she could be easily influenced for good or evil—she was in that state of weakness when temptation is least easily resisted.

A few days after the arrival of Nan's nurse Mrs. Willis was obliged unexpectedly to leave home; a near relative was dangerously ill in London, and the school-mistress went away in much trouble and anxiety. Some of her favourite pupils flocked to the front entrance to see their beloved mistress off. Amongst the group Cecil stood, and several girls of the first class; many of the little girls were also present, but Annie was not amongst them. Just at

the last moment she rushed up breathlessly; she was tying some starry jasmine and some blue forget-me-nots together, and as the carriage was moving off she flung the charming bouquet into her mistress's lap.

Mrs. Willis rewarded her with one of her old looks of confidence and love; she raised the flowers to her lips and kissed them, and her eyes smiled on Annie.

"Good-bye, dear," she called out; "good-bye, all my dear girls; I will try and be back to-morrow night. Remember, my children, during my absence I trust you."

The carriage disappeared down the avenue, and the group of girls melted away. Cecil looked round for Annie, but Annie had been the first to disappear.

When her mistress had kissed the flowers and smiled at her, Annie darted into the shrubbery and stood there wiping the fast-falling tears from her eyes. She was interrupted in this occupation by the sudden cries of two glad and eager voices, and instantly her hands were taken, and some girls rather younger than herself began to drag her in the opposite direction through the shrubbery.

"Come, Annie—come at once, Annie, darling," exclaimed Phyllis and Nora Raymond. "The basket has come; it's under the thick laurel-tree in the back avenue. We are all waiting for you; we none of us will open it till you arrive."

Annie's face, a truly April one, changed as if by magic. The tears dried on her cheeks; her eyes filled with sunlight; she was all eager for the coming fun.

"Then we won't lose a moment, Phyllis," she

said; "we'll see what that duck of a Betty has done for us."

The three girls scampered down the back avenue, where they found five of their companions, amongst them Susan Drummond, standing in different attitudes of expectation near a very large and low-growing laurel-tree. Every one raised a shout when Annie appeared; she was undoubtedly recognised as queen and leader of the proceedings. She took her post without an instant's hesitation, and began ordering her willing subjects about.

"Now, is the coast clear? yes, I think so. Come, Susie, greedy as you are, you must take your part. You alone of all of us can cackle with the exact imitation of an old hen: get behind that tree at once and watch the yard. Don't forget to cackle for your life if you even see the shadow of a footfall. Norah, my pretty birdie, you must be the thrush for the nonce; here, take your post, watch the lawn and the front avenue. Now then, girls, the rest of us can see what spoils Betty has provided for us."

The basket was dragged from its hiding-place, and longing faces peered eagerly and greedily into its contents.

"Oh, oh! I say, cherries! and what a lot! Good Betty! dear, darling Betty! you gathered those from your own trees, and they are as ripe as your apple-blossom cheeks! Now then, what next? I do declare, meringues! Betty knew my weakness. Twelve meringues—that is one and a half apiece; Susan Drummond sha'n't have more than her share. Meringues and cheesecakes and—tartlets—oh! oh! what a duck Betty is! A plum-cake—good, excellent Betty, she deserves to be canonised! What have we

here? Roast chickens—better and better! What is in this parcel? Slices of ham; Betty knew she dare not show her face again if she forgot the ham. Knives and forks, spoons—fresh rolls—salt and pepper, and a dozen bottles of ginger-beer, and a little corkscrew in case we want it."

These various exclamations came from many lips. The contents of the basket were carefully and tenderly replaced, the lid was fastened down, and it was once more consigned to its hiding-place under the thick boughs of the laurel.

Not a moment too soon, for just at this instant Susan cackled fiercely, and the little group withdrew, Annie first whispering—

"At twelve to-night, then, girls—oh, yes, I have managed the key."

CHAPTER XXVII.

TRUANTS.

IT was a proverbial saying in the school that Annie Forest was always in hot water; she was exceedingly daring, and loved what she called a spice of danger. This was not the first stolen picnic at which Annie reigned as queen, but this was the largest she had yet organised, and this was the first time she had dared to go out of doors with her satellites.

Hitherto these naughty sprites had been content to carry their baskets full of artfully-concealed provisions to a disused attic which was exactly over the box-room, and consequently out of reach of the inhabited part of the house. Here, making a table of

a great chest which stood in the attic, they feasted gloriously, undisturbed by the musty smell or by the innumerable spiders and beetles which disappeared rapidly in all directions at their approach; but when Annie one day incautiously suggested that on summer nights the outside world was all at their disposal, they began to discover flaws in their banqueting-hall. Mary Price said the musty smell made her half sick; Phyllis declared that at the sight of a spider she invariably turned faint; and Susan Drummond was heard to murmur that in a dusty, fusty attic even meringues scarcely kept her awake. The girls were all wild to try a midnight picnic out of doors, and Annie in her present mood, was only too eager for the fun.

With her usual skill she organised the whole undertaking, and eight agitated, slightly frightened, but much excited girls retired to their rooms that night. Annie, in her heart of hearts, felt rather sorry that Mrs. Willis should happen to be away; dim ideas of honour and trustworthiness were still stirring in her breast, but she dared not think now.

The night was in every respect propitious; the moon would not rise until after twelve, so the little party could get away under the friendly shelter of the darkness, and soon afterwards have plenty of light to enjoy their stolen feast. They had arranged to make no movement until close on midnight, and then they were all to meet in a passage which belonged to the kitchen regions, and where there was a side door which opened directly into the shrubbery. This door was not very often unlocked, and Annie had taken the key from its place in the lock some days before. She went to bed with her companions at nine o'clock as usual, and presently fell into an uneasy

doze. She awoke to hear the great clock in the hall strike eleven, and a few minutes afterwards she heard Miss Danesbury's footsteps retiring to her room at the other end of the passage.

"Danesbury is always the last to go to bed," whispered Annie to herself; "I can get up presently."

She lay for another twenty minutes, then, softly rising, began to put on her clothes in the dark. Over her dress she fastened her waterproof, and placed a close-fitting brown velvet cap on her curly head. Having dressed herself, she approached Susan's bed, with the intention of rousing her.

"I shall have fine work now," she said, "and shall probably have to resort to cold water. Really, if Susy proves too hard to wake, I shall let her sleep on—her drowsiness is past bearing."

Annie, however, was considerably startled when she discovered that Miss Drummond's bed was without an occupant.

At this moment the room door was very softly opened, and Susan, fully dressed and in her waterproof, came in.

"Why, Susy, where have you been?" exclaimed Annie. "Fancy you being awake a moment before it is necessary!"

"For once in a way I was restless," replied Miss Drummond, "so I thought I would get up, and take a turn in the passage outside. The house is perfectly quiet, and we can come now; most of the girls are already waiting at the side door."

Holding their shoes in their hands, Annie and Susan went noiselessly down the carpetless stairs, and found the remaining six girls waiting for them by the side door.

"Rover is our one last danger now," said Annie, as she fitted the well-oiled key into the lock. "Put on your shoes, girls, and let me out first; I think I can manage him."

She was alluding to a great mastiff which was usually kept chained up by day. Phyllis and Norah laid their hands on her arm.

"Oh, Annie, oh, love, suppose he seizes on you, and knocks you down—oh, dare you venture?"

"Let me go," said Annie a little contemptuously; "you don't suppose I am afraid?"

Her fingers trembled, for her nerves were highly strung; but she managed to unlock the door and draw back the bolts, and, opening it softly, she went out into the silent night.

Very slight as the noise she made was, it had aroused the watchful Rover, who trotted around swiftly to know what was the matter. But Annie had made friends with Rover long ago by stealing to his kennel door and feeding him, and she had now but to say "Rover" in her melodious voice, and throw her arms around his neck, to completely subvert his morals.

"He is one of us, girls," she called in a whisper to her companions; "come out. Rover will be as naughty as the rest of us, and go with us as our body-guard to the fairies' field. Now, I will lock the door on the outside, and we can be off. Ah, the moon is getting up splendidly, and when we have secured Betty's basket, we shall be quite out of reach of danger."

At Annie's words of encouragement the seven girls ventured out. She locked the door, put the key into her pocket, and, holding Rover by his collar, led

the way in the direction of the laurel-bush. The basket was secured, and Susan, to her disgust, and Mary Morris were elected for the first part of the way to carry it. The young truants then walked quickly down the avenue until they came to a turnstile which led into a wood.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN THE FAIRIES' FIELD.

THE moon had now come up brilliantly, and the little party were in the highest possible spirits. They had got safely away from the house, and there was now, comparatively speaking, little fear of discovery. The more timid ones, who ventured to confess that their hearts were in their mouths while Annie was unlocking the side door, now became the most excited, and perhaps the boldest, under the reaction which set in. Even the wood, which was comparatively dark, with only patches of moonlight here and there, and queer weird shadows where the trees were thinnest, could not affect their spirits.

The poor, sleepy rabbits must have been astonished that night at the shouts of the revellers, as they hurried past them, and the birds must have taken their sleepy heads from under their downy wings, and wondered if the morning had come some hours before its usual time.

More than one solemn old owl blinked at them, and hooted as they passed, and told them in owl language what silly, naughty young things they were, and how they would repent of this dissipation

by-and-by. But if the girls were to have an hour of remorse, it did not visit them then; their hearts were like feathers, and by the time they reached the fields where the fairies were supposed to play their spirits had become almost uncontrollable.

Luckily for them this small green field lay in a secluded hollow, and more luckily for them no tramps were about to hear their merriment. Rover, who constituted himself Annie's protector, now lay down by her side, and as she was the real ringleader and queen of the occasion, she ordered her subjects about pretty sharply.

"Now, girls, quick; open the basket. Yes, I'm going to rest. I have organised the whole thing, and I'm fairly tired; so I'll just sit quietly here, and Rover will take care of me while you set things straight. Ah! good Betty; she did not even forget the white table-cloth."

Here one of the girls remarked casually that the grass was wet with dew, and that it was well they had all put on their waterproofs.

Annie interrupted again in a petulant voice—

"Don't croak, Mary Morris. Out with the chickens, lay the ham in this corner, and the cherries will make a picturesque pile in the middle. Twelve meringues in all, that means a meringue and a half each. We shall have some difficulty in dividing. Oh, dear! oh, dear! how hungry I am! I was far too excited to eat anything at supper-time."

"So was I," said Phyllis, coming up and pressing close to Annie. "I do think Miss Danesbury cuts the bread and butter too thick—don't you, Annie? I could not eat mine at all, to-night, and Cecil Temple asked me if I was not well."

"Those who don't want chicken hold up their hands," here interrupted Annie, who had tossed her brown cap on the grass, and between whose brows a faint frown had passed for an instant at the mention of Cecil's name.

The feast now began in earnest, and silence reigned for a short time, broken only by the clatter of plates, and such an occasional remark as "Pass the salt, please," "Pepper this way, if you've no objection," "How good chicken tastes in fairy-land," &c. At last the ginger-beer bottles began to pop—the girls' first hunger was appeased. Rover gladly crunched up all the bones, and conversation flowed once more, accompanied by the delicate diversion of taking alternate bites at meringues and cheesecakes.

"I wish the fairies would come out," said Annie.

"Oh, don't!" shivered Phyllis, looking round her nervously.

"Annie, darling, do tell us a ghost story," cried several voices.

Annie laughed, and commenced a series of nonsense tales, all of a slightly eerie character, which she made up on the spot.

The moon riding high in the heavens looked down on the young giddy heads, and their laughter, naughty as they were, sounded sweet in the night air.

Time flew quickly, and the girls suddenly discovered that they must pack up their table-cloth and remove all traces of the feast unless they wished the bright light of morning to discover them. They rose hastily, sighing, and slightly depressed now that their fun was over. The white table-cloth, no longer very white, was packed into the basket, the ginger-

beer bottles placed on top of it, and the lid fastened down. Not a crumb of the feast remained; Rover had demolished the bones, and the eight girls had made short work of everything else, with the exception of the cherry-stones, which Phyllis carefully collected and popped into a little hole in the ground.

The party then progressed slowly homewards, and once more entered the dark wood. They were much more silent now; the wood was darker, and the chill which foretells the dawn was making itself felt in the air. Either the sense of cold or a certain effect produced by Annie's ridiculous stories, made many of the little party unduly nervous.

They had only taken a few steps through the wood when Phyllis suddenly uttered a piercing shriek. This shriek was echoed by Nora and by Mary Morris, and all their hearts seemed to leap into their mouths when they saw something move among the trees. Rover uttered a growl, and, but for Annie's detaining hand, would have sprung forward. The high-spirited girl was not to be easily daunted.

"Behold, girls, the goblin of the woods," she exclaimed. "Quiet, Rover; stand still."

The next instant the fears of the little party reached their culmination when a tall, dark figure stood directly in their paths.

"If you don't let us pass at once," said Annie's voice, "I'll set Rover at you."

The dog began to bark loudly, and quivered from head to foot.

The figure moved a little to one side, and a rather deep and slightly dramatic voice said—

"I mean you no harm, young ladies; I'm only a gipsy-mother from the tents yonder. You are

welcome to get back to Lavender House. I have then one course plain before me."

"Come on, girls," said Annie, now considerably frightened, while Phyllis, and Nora, and one or two more began to sob.

"Look here, young ladies," said the gipsy in a whining voice, "I don't mean you no harm, my pretties, and it's no affair of mine telling the good ladies at Lavender House what I've seen. You cross my hand, dears, each of you, with a bit of silver, and all I'll do is to tell your pretty fortunes, and mum is the word with the gipsy-mother as far as this night's prank is concerned."

"We had better do it, Annie—we had better do it," here sobbed Phyllis. "If this was found out by Mrs. Willis we might be expelled—we might, indeed; and that horrid woman is sure to tell of us—I know she is."

"Quite sure to tell, dear," said the tall gipsy, dropping a curtsey in a manner which looked frightfully sarcastic in the long shadows made by the trees. "Quite sure to tell, and to be expelled is the very least that could happen to such naughty little ladies. Here's a nice little bit of clearing in the wood, and we'll all come over, and Mother Rachel will tell your fortunes in a twinkling, and no one will be the wiser. Sixpence a-piece, my dears—only sixpence a-piece."

"Oh, come; do, do come," said Nora, and the next moment they were all standing in a circle round Mother Rachel, who pocketed her black-mail eagerly, and repeated some gibberish over each little hand. Over Annie's palm she lingered for a brief moment, and looked with her penetrating eyes into the girl's face.

"You'll have suffering before you, miss; some suspicion, and danger even to life itself. But you'll triumph, my dear, you'll triumph. You're a plucky one, and you'll do a brave deed. There—good-night, young ladies; you have nothing more to fear from Mother Rachel."

The tall dark figure disappeared into the blackest shadows of the wood, and the girls, now like so many frightened hares, flew home. They deposited their basket where Betty would find it, under the shadow of the great laurel in the back avenue. They all bade Rover an affectionate "good-night." Annie softly unlocked the side-door, and one by one, with their shoes in their hands, they regained their bedrooms. They were all very tired, and very cold, and a dull fear and sense of insecurity rested over each little heart. Suppose Mother Rachel proved unfaithful, notwithstanding the sixpences?

CHAPTER XXIX.

HESTER'S FORGOTTEN BOOK.

It wanted scarcely three weeks to the holidays, and therefore scarcely three weeks to that auspicious day when Lavender House was to be the scene of one long triumph, and was to be the happy spot selected for a Midsummer holiday, accompanied by all that could make a holiday perfect—for youth and health would be there, and even the unsuccessful competitors for the great prizes would not have too sore hearts, for they would know that on the next day they were going home. Each girl who had done her best would

have a word of commendation, and only those who were very naughty, or very stubborn, could resist the all-potent elixir of happiness which would be poured out so abundantly for Mrs. Willis's pupils on this day.

Now that the time was drawing so near, those girls who were working for prizes found themselves fully occupied from morning to night. In play-hours even, girls would be seen with their heads bent over their books, and, between the prizes and the acting, no little bees in any hive could be more constantly employed than were these young girls just now.

No happiness is, after all, to be compared to the happiness of healthful occupation. Busy people have no time to fret and no time to grumble. According to our old friend, Dr. Watts, people who are healthily busy have also no time to be naughty, for the old doctor says that it is for idle hands that mischief is prepared.

Be that as it may, and there is great truth in it, some naughty sprites, some bad fairies, were flitting around and about that apparently peaceful atmosphere. That sunny home, governed by all that was sweet and good, was not without its serpent.

Of all the prizes which attracted interest and aroused competition, the prize for English composition was this year the most popular. In the first place, this was known to be Mrs. Willis's own favourite subject. She had a great wish that her girls should write intelligibly—she had a greater wish that, if possible, they should think.

"Never was there so much written and printed," she was often heard to say; "but can any one show me a book with thoughts in it? Can any one show me,

unless as a rare exception, a book which will live? Oh, yes, these books which issue from the press in thousands are, many of them, very smart, a great many of them clever, but they are thrown off too quickly. All great things, great books amongst them, must be evolved slowly."

Then she would tell her pupils what she considered the reason of this.

"In these days," she would say, "all girls are what is called highly educated. Girls and boys alike must go in for competitive examinations, must take out diplomas, and must pass certain standards of excellence. The system is cramming from beginning to end. There is no time for reflection. In short, my dear girls, you swallow a great deal, but you do not digest your intellectual food."

Mrs. Willis hailed with pleasure any little dawnings of real thought in her girls' prize essays. More than once she bestowed the prize upon the essay which seemed to the girls the most crude and unfinished.

"Never mind," she would say, "here is an idea—or at least half an idea. This little bit of composition is original, and not, at best, a poor imitation of Sir Walter Scott or Lord Macaulay."

Thus the girls found a strong stimulus to be their real selves in these little essays, and the best of them chose their subject and let it ferment in their brains without the aid of books, except for the more technical parts.

More than one girl in the school was surprised at Dora Russell exerting herself to try for the prize essay. She was just about to close her school career, and they could not make out why she roused herself to work for the most difficult prize, for which she

would have to compete with any girl in the school who chose to make a similar attempt.

Dora, however, had her own, not very high motive for making the attempt. She was a thoroughly accomplished girl, graceful in her appearance and manner; in short, just the sort of girl who would be supposed to do credit to a school. She played with finish, and even delicacy of touch. There was certainly no soul in her music, but neither were there any wrong notes. Her drawings were equally correct, her perspective good, her trees were real trees, and the colouring of her water-colour sketches was pure. She spoke French extremely well, and with a correct accent, and her German also was above the average. Nevertheless, Dora was common-place, and those girls who knew her best spoke sarcastically, and smiled at one another when she alluded to her prize essay, and seemed confident of being the successful competitor.

"You won't like to be beaten, Dora, say, by Annie Forest," they would laughingly remark; whereupon Dora's calm face, would slightly flush and her lips would assume a very proud curve. If there was one thing she could not bear it was to be beaten.

"Why do you try for it, Dora?" her class-fellows would ask; but here Dora made no reply: she kept her reason to herself.

The fact was, Dora, who must be a copyist to the end of the chapter, and who could never to her latest day do anything original, had determined to try for the composition prize because she happened accidentally to hear a conversation between Mrs. Willis and Miss Danesbury, in which something

was said about a gold locket with Mrs. Willis's portrait inside.

Dora instantly jumped at the conclusion that this was to be the great prize bestowed upon the successful essayist. Delightful idea; how well the trinket would look round her smooth white throat! Instantly she determined to try for this prize, and of course as instantly the bare idea of defeat became intolerable to her. She went steadily and methodically to work. With extreme care she chose her subject. Knowing something of Mrs. Willis's peculiarities, she determined that her theme should not be historical; she believed that she could express herself freely and with power if only she could secure an unhackneyed subject. Suddenly an idea which she considered brilliant occurred to her. She would call her composition "The River." This should not bear reference to Father Thames, or any other special river of England, but it should trace the windings of some fabled stream of Dora's imagination, which, as it flowed along, should tell something of the story of the many places by which it passed. Dora was charmed with her own thought, and worked hard, evening after evening, at her subject, covering sheets of manuscript paper with pencilled jottings, and arranging and rearranging her somewhat confused thoughts. She greatly admired a perfectly rounded period, and she was most particular as to the style in which she wrote. For the purpose of improving her style she even studied old volumes of Addison's *Spectator;* but after a time she gave up this course of study, for she found it so difficult to mould her English to Addison's that she came to the comfortable conclusion that Addison was decidedly obsolete,

and that if she wished to do full justice to "The River" she must trust to her own unaided genius.

At last the first ten pages were written. The subject was entered upon with considerable flourishes, and some rather apt poetical quotations from a book containing a collection of poems; the river itself had already left its home in the mountain, and was careering merrily past sunny meadows and little rural, impossible cottages, where the golden-haired children played.

Dora made a very neat copy of her essay so far. She now began to see her way clearly—there would be a very powerful passage as the river approached the murky town. Here, indeed, would be room for powerful and pathetic writing. She wondered if she might venture so far as to hide a suicide in her rushing waters; and then at last the brawling river would lose itself in the sea; and, of course, there would not be the smallest connection between her river, and Kingsley's well-known song,

"Clear and cool."

She finished writing her ten pages, and being now positively certain of her gold locket, went to bed in a happy state of mind.

This was the very night when Annie was to lead her revellers through the dark wood, but Dora, who never troubled herself about the younger classes, would have been certainly the last to notice the fact that a few of the girls in Lavender House seemed little disposed to eat their suppers of thick bread-and-butter and milk. She went to bed and dreamt happy dreams about her golden locket, and had little idea that any mischief was about to be performed.

Hester Thornton also, but in a very different spirit, was working hard at her essay. Hester worked conscientiously; she had chosen "Marie Antoinette" as her theme, and she read the sorrowful story of the beautiful queen with intense interest, and tried hard to get herself into the spirit of the times about which she must write. She had scarcely begun her essay yet, but she had already collected most of the historical facts.

Hester was a very careful little student, and as she prepared herself for the great work, she thought little or nothing about the prize she only wanted to do justice to the unfortunate Queen of France. She was in bed that night, and just dropping off to sleep, when she suddenly remembered that she had left a volume of French poetry on her school desk. This was against the rules, and she knew that Miss Danesbury would confiscate the book in the morning, and would not let her have it back for a week. Hester particularly wanted this special book just now, as some of the verses bore reference to her subject, and she could scarcely get on with her essay without having it to refer to. She must lose no time in instantly beginning to write her essay, and to do without her book of poetry for a week would be a serious injury to her.

She resolved, therefore, to break through one of the rules, and, after lying awake until the whole house was quiet, to slip downstairs, enter the schoolroom and secure her poems. She heard the clock strike eleven, and she knew that in a very few moments Miss Danesbury and Miss Good would have retired to their rooms. Ah, yes, that was Miss Danesbury's step passing her door. Ten minutes later she glided out

of bed, slipped on her dressing-gown, and opening her door ran swiftly down the carpetless stairs, and found herself in the great stone hall which led to the schoolroom.

She was surprised to find the schoolroom door a little ajar, but she entered the room without hesitation, and, dark as it was, soon found her desk, and the book of poems lying on the top. Hester was about to return when she was startled by a little noise in that portion of the room where the first class girls sat. The next moment somebody came heavily and rather clumsily down the room, and the moon which was just beginning to rise fell for an instant on a girl's face. Hester recognised the face of Susan Drummond. What could she be doing here? She did not dare to speak, for she herself had broken a rule in visiting the schoolroom. She remained, therefore, perfectly still until Susan's steps died away, and then, thankful to have secured her own property, returned to her bedroom, and a moment or two later was sound asleep.

CHAPTER XXX.

"A MUDDY STREAM."

IN the morning Dora Russell sat down as usual before her orderly and neatly-kept desk. She raised the lid to find everything in its place—her books and exercises all as they should be, and her pet essay in a neat brown paper cover, lying just as she had left it the night before. She was really getting quite excited about her river, and as this

was a half-holiday, she determined to have a good work at it in the afternoon. She was beginning also to experience that longing for an auditor which occasionally is known to trouble the breasts of genius. She felt that those graceful ideas, that elegant language, those measured periods, might strike happily on some other ears before they were read aloud as the great work of the Midsummer holidays.

She knew that Hester Thornton was making what she was pleased to term a poor little attempt at trying for the same prize. Hester would scarcely venture to copy anything from Dora's essay; she would probably be discouraged, poor girl, in working any longer at her own composition; but Dora felt that the temptation to read "The River," as far as it had gone, to Hester was really too great to be resisted. Accordingly, after dinner she graciously invited Hester to accompany her to a bower in the garden, where the two friends might revel over the results of Dora's extraordinary talents.

Hester was still, to a certain extent, under Dora's influence, and had not the courage to tell her that she intended to be very busy over her own essay this afternoon.

"Now, Hester, dear," said Dora, when they found themselves both seated in the bower, "you are the only girl in the school to whom I could confide the subject of my great essay. I really believe that I have hit on something absolutely original. My dear child, I hope you won't allow yourself to be discouraged. I fear that you won't have much heart to go on with your theme

after you have read my words; but, never mind, dear, it will be good practice for you, and you know it *was* rather silly to go in for a prize which I intended to compete for."

"May I read your essay, please, Dora?" asked Hester. "I am very much interested in my own study, and, whether I win the prize or not, I shall always remember the pleasure I took in writing it."

"What subject did you select, dear?" inquired Miss Russell.

"Well, I am attempting a little sketch of Marie Antoinette."

"Ah, hackneyed, my dear girl—terribly hackneyed; but, of course, I don't mean to discourage you. *Now I*—I draw a life-picture, and I call it 'The River.' See how it begins—why, I declare I know the words by heart, '*As our eyes rest on this clear and limpid stream, as we see the sun sparkle*——' My dear Hester, you shall read me my essay aloud. I shall like to hear my own words from your lips, and you have really a pretty accent, dear."

Hester folded back the brown-paper cover, and wanting to have her task over began to read hastily. But, as her eyes rested on the first lines, she turned to her companion, and said—

"Did you not tell me that your essay was called 'The River'?"

"Yes, dear; the full title is 'The Windings of a Noble River.'

"That's very odd," replied Hester. "What I see here is 'The Meanderings of a Muddy Stream.' '*As our dull orbs rest on this turbid water on which the sun cannot possibly shine.*' Why, Dora, this cannot be your essay, and yet, surely, it is your handwriting."

Dora, with her face suddenly flushing a vivid crimson, snatched the manuscript from Hester's hand, and looked over it eagerly. Alas! there was no doubt. The title of this essay was "The Meanderings of a Muddy Stream," and the words which immediately followed were a smart and ridiculous parody on her own high-flown sentences. The resemblance to her handwriting was perfect. The brown paper cover, neatly sewn on to protect the white manuscript, was undoubtedly her cover; the very paper on which the words were written seemed in all particulars the same. Dora turned the sheets eagerly, and here for the first time she saw a difference. Only four or five pages of the nonsense essay had been attempted, and the night before, when finishing her toil, she had proudly numbered her tenth page. She looked through the whole thing, turning leaf after leaf, while her cheeks were crimson, and her hands trembled. In the first moment of horrible humiliation and dismay she literally could not speak.

At last, springing to her feet, and confronting the astonished and almost frightened Hester, she found her voice.

"Hester, you must help me in this. The most dreadful, the most atrocious fraud has been committed. Some one has been base enough, audacious enough, wicked enough, to go to my desk privately, and take away my real essay—my work over which I have laboured and toiled. The expressions of my —my—yes, I will say it—my genius, have been ruthlessly burnt, or otherwise made away with, and *this* thing has been put in their place. Hester, why don't you speak—why do you stare at me like this?"

"I am puzzled by the writing," said Hester; "the writing is yours."

"The writing is mine!—oh, you wicked girl! The writing is an imitation of mine—a feeble and poor imitation. I thought, Hester, that by this time you knew your friend's handwriting. I thought that one in whom I have confided—one whom I have stooped to notice because I fancied we had a community of soul, would not be so ridiculous and so silly as to mistake this writing for mine. Look again, please, Hester Thornton, and tell me if I am ever so vulgar as to cross my *t's*. You know I *always* loop them; and do I make a capital B in this fashion? And do I indulge in flourishes? I grant you that the general effect to a casual observer would be something the same, but you, Hester—I thought you knew me better."

Here Hester, examining the false essay, had to confess that the crossed *t's* and the flourishes were unlike Miss Russell's calligraphy.

"It is a forgery, most cleverly done," said Dora. "There is such a thing, Hester, as being wickedly clever. This spiteful, cruel attempt to injure another can have but proceeded from one very low order of mind. Hester, there has been plenty of favouritism in this school, but do you suppose I shall allow such a thing as this to pass over unsearched into? If necessary, I shall ask my father to interfere. This is a slight—an outrage; but the whole mystery shall at last be cleared up. Miss Good and Miss Danesbury shall be informed at once, and the very instant Mrs. Willis returns she shall be told what a serpent she has been nursing in this false, wicked girl, Annie Forest."

"Stop, Dora," said Hester suddenly. She sprang

to her feet, clasping her hands, and her colour varied rapidly from white to red. A sudden light poured in upon her, and she was about to speak when something—quite a small, trivial thing—occurred. She only saw little Nan in the distance flying swiftly, with outstretched arms, to meet a girl, whose knees she clasped in baby ecstasy. The girl stooped down and kissed the little face, and the round arms were flung around her neck. The next instant Annie Forest continued her walk alone, and Nan, looking wistfully back after her, went in another direction with her nurse. The whole scene took but a moment to enact, but as she watched, Hester's face grew hard and white. She sat down again, with her lips firmly pressed together.

"What is it, Hester?" exclaimed Dora. "What were you going to say? You surely know nothing about this?"

"Well, Dora, I am not the guilty person. I was only going to remark that you cannot be *sure* it is Annie Forest."

"Oh, so you are going to take that horrid girl's part now? I wonder at you! She all but killed your little sister, and then stole her love away from you. Did you see the little thing now, how she flew to her? Why, she never kisses you like that."

"I know—I know," said Hester, and she turned away her face with a groan, and leant forward against the rustic bench, pressing her hot forehead down on her hands.

"You'll have your triumph, Hester, when Miss Forest is publicly expelled," said Dora, tapping her lightly on the shoulder, and then, taking up the forged essay, she went slowly out of the garden.

CHAPTER XXXI.

GOOD AND BAD ANGELS.

HESTER stayed behind in the shady little arbour, and then, on that soft spring day, while the birds sang overhead, and the warm light breezes came in and fanned her hot cheeks, good angels and bad drew near to fight for a victory. Which would conquer? Hester had many faults, but hitherto she had been honourable and truthful; her sins had been those of pride and jealousy, but she had never told a falsehood in her life. She knew perfectly—she trembled as the full knowledge overpowered her—that she had it in her power to exonerate Annie. She could not in the least imagine how stupid Susan Drummond could contrive and carry out such a clever and deep-laid plot; but she knew also that if she related what she had seen with her own eyes the night before, she would probably give such a clue to the apparent mystery that the truth would come to light.

If Annie was cleared from this accusation, doubtless the old story of her supposed guilt with regard to Mrs. Willis's caricature would also be read with its right key. Hester was a clever and sharp girl; and the fact of seeing Susan Drummond in the schoolroom in the dead of night opened her eyes also to one or two other apparent little mysteries. While Susan was her own room-mate she had often given a passing wonder to the fact of her extraordinary desire to overcome her sleepiness, and had laughed over the expedients Susan had used to wake at all moments.

These things, at the time, had scarcely given her a moment's serious reflection; but now she pondered them carefully, and became more and more certain that, for some inexplicable and unfathomable reason, sleepy, and apparently innocent, Susan Drummond wished to sow the seeds of mischief and discord in the school. Hester was sure that if she chose to speak now she could clear poor Annie, and restore her to her lost place in Mrs. Willis's favour.

Should she do so?—ah! should she? Her lips trembled, her colour came and went as the angels, good and bad, fought hard for victory within her. How she had longed to revenge herself on Annie! How cordially she had hated her! Now was the moment of her revenge. She had but to remain silent now, and to let matters take their course; she had but to hold her tongue about the little incident of last night, and, without any doubt, circumstantial evidence would point at Annie Forest, and she would be expelled from the school. Mrs. Willis must condemn her now. Mr. Everard must pronounce her guilty now. She would go, and when the coast was again clear the love which she had taken from Hester —the precious love of Hester's only little sister— would return.

"You will be miserable; you will be miserable," whispered the good angels sorrowfully in her ear; but she did not listen to them.

"I said I would revenge myself, and this is my opportunity," she murmured. "Silence—just simply silence—will be my revenge."

Then the good angels went sorrowfully back to their Father in heaven, and the wicked angels rejoiced. Hester had fallen very low.

CHAPTER XXXII.

FRESH SUSPICIONS.

MRS. WILLIS was not at home many hours before Dora Russell begged for an interview with her. Annie had not as yet heard anything of the changed essay; for Dora had resolved to keep the thing a secret until Mrs. Willis herself took the matter in hand.

Annie was feeling not a little anxious and depressed. She was sorry now that she had led the girls that wild escapade through the wood. Phyllis and Nora were both suffering from heavy colds in consequence, and Susan Drummond was looking more pasty about her complexion, and was more dismally sleepy than usual. Annie was going through her usual season of intense remorse after one of her wild pranks. No one repented with more apparent fervor than she did, and yet no one so easily succumbed to the next temptation. Had Annie been alone in the matter she would have gone straight to Mrs. Willis and confessed all; but she could not do this without implicating her companions, who would have screamed with horror at the very suggestion.

All the girls were more or less depressed by the knowledge that the gipsy woman, Mother Rachel, shared their secret; and they often whispered together as to the chances of her betraying them. Old Betty they could trust; for Betty, the cake-woman, had been an arch-conspirator with the naughty girls of Lavender House from time immemorial. Betty had

always managed to provide their stolen suppers for them, and had been most accommodating in the matter of pay. Yes, with Betty they felt they were safe; but Mother Rachel was a different person. She might like to be paid a few more sixpences for her silence; she might hover about the grounds; she might be noticed. At any moment she might boldly demand an interview with Mrs. Willis.

"I'm awfully afraid of Mother Rachel," Phyllis moaned, as she shivered under the influence of her bad cold.

Nora said "I should faint if I saw her again, I know I should;" while the other girls always went out provided with stray sixpences, in case the gipsy mother should start up from some unexpected quarter and demand black-mail.

On the day of Mrs. Willis's return, Annie was pacing up and down the shady walk, and indulging in some rather melancholy and regretful thoughts, when Susan Drummond and Mary Morris rushed up to her, white with terror.

"She's down there, by the copse, and she's beckoning to us! Oh, do come with us—do, darling, dear Annie."

"There's no use in it," replied Annie; "Mother Rachel wants money, and I am not going to give her any. Don't be afraid of her, girls, and don't give her money. After all, why should she tell on us? she would gain nothing by doing so."

"Oh, yes, she would, Annie—she would, Annie," said Mary Morris, beginning to sob; "oh, do come with us, do! We must pacify her, we really must."

"I can't come now," said Annie; "hark! some one is calling me. Yes, Miss Danesbury—what is it?"

"Mrs. Willis wishes to see you at once, Annie, in her private sitting-room," replied Miss Danesbury; and Annie, wondering not a little, but quite unsuspicious, ran off.

The fact, however, of her having deliberately disobeyed Mrs. Willis, and done something which she knew would greatly pain her, brought a shade of embarrassment to her usually candid face. She had also to confess to herself that she did not feel quite so comfortable about Mother Rachel as she had given Mary Morris and Susan Drummond to understand. Her steps lagged more and more as she approached the house, and she wished, oh, how longingly! oh, how regretfully! that she had not been naughty and wild and disobedient in her beloved teacher's absence.

"But where is the use of regretting what is done?" she said, half aloud. "I know I can never be good—never, never!"

She pushed aside the heavy velvet curtains which shaded the door of the private sitting-room, and went in, to find Mrs. Willis seated by her desk, very pale and tired and unhappy looking, while Dora Russell, with crimson spots on her cheeks and a very angry glitter in her eyes, stood by the mantel-piece.

"Come here, Annie dear," said Mrs. Willis in her usual gentle and affectionate tone.

Annie's first wild impulse was to rush to her governess's side, to fling her arms round her neck, and, as a child would confess to her mother, to tell her all that story of the walk through the wood, and the stolen picnic in the fairies' field. Three things, however, restrained her—she must not relieve her own troubles at the expense of betraying others; she could not, even if she were willing, say a word in the presence of

this cold and angry-looking Dora; in the third place, Mrs. Willis looked very tired and very sad. Not for worlds would she add to her troubles at this instant. She came into the room, however, with a slight hesitation of manner, and a clouded brow, which caused Mrs. Willis to watch her with anxiety, and Dora with triumph.

"Come here, Annie," repeated the governess. "I want to speak to you. Something very dishonourable and disgraceful has been done in my absence."

Annie's face suddenly became as white as a sheet. Could the gipsy mother have already betrayed them all?

Mrs. Willis, noticing her too evident confusion, continued in a voice which, in spite of herself, became stern and severe.

"I shall expect the truth at any cost, my dear. Look at this manuscript-book. Do you know anything of the handwriting?"

"Why, it is yours, of course, Dora," said Annie, who was now absolutely bewildered.

"It is *not* mine," began Dora, but Mrs. Willis held up her hand.

"Allow me to speak, Miss Russell. I can best explain matters. Annie, during my absence some one has been guilty of a very base and wicked act. One of the girls in this school has gone secretly to Dora Russell's desk, and taken away ten pages of an essay which she had called 'The River,' and which she was preparing for the prize competition next month. Instead of Dora's essay this that you now see was put in its place. Examine it, my dear. Can you tell me anything about it?"

Annie took the manuscript-book, and turned the leaves.

"Is it meant for a parody?" she asked, after a pause; "it sounds ridiculous. No, Mrs. Willis, I know nothing whatever about it; some one has imitated Dora's handwriting. I cannot imagine who is the culprit."

She threw the manuscript-book with a certain easy carelessness on the table by her side, and glanced up with a twinkle of mirth in her eyes at Dora.

"I suppose it is meant for a clever parody," she repeated; "at least it is amusing."

Her manner displeased Mrs. Willis, and very nearly maddened poor Dora.

"We have not sent for you, Annie," said her teacher, "to ask you your opinion of the parody, but to try and get you to throw light on the subject. We must find out, and at once, who has been so wicked as to deliberately injure another girl."

"But why have you sent for *me?*" asked Annie, drawing herself up, and speaking with a little shade of haughtiness.

"Because," said Dora Russell, who could no longer contain her outraged feelings, "because you alone can throw light on it—because you alone in the school are base enough to do anything so mean—because you alone can caricature."

"Oh, that is it," said Annie; "you suspect me, then. Do *you* suspect me, Mrs. Willis?"

"My dear—what can I say?"

"Nothing, if you do. In this school my word has long gone for nothing. I am a naughty, headstrong, wilful girl, but in this matter I am perfectly innocent. I never saw that essay before; I never in all my life went to Dora Russell's desk. I am headstrong and wild, but I don't do spiteful things. I have no object

in injuring Dora; she is nothing to me—nothing. She is trying for the essay prize, but she has no chance of winning it. Why should I trouble myself to injure her? why should I even take the pains to parody her words and copy her handwriting? Mrs. Willis, you need not believe me—I see you do not believe me—but I am quite innocent."

Here Annie burst into sudden tears, and ran out of the room.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

UNTRUSTWORTHY.

Dora Russell had declared, in Hester's presence, and with intense energy in her manner, that the author of the insult to which she had been exposed should be publicly punished, and, if possible, expelled. On the evening of her interview with the head teacher, she had so far forgotten herself as to reiterate this desire with extreme vehemence. She had boldly declared her firm conviction of Annie's guilt, and had broadly hinted at Mrs. Willis's favouritism towards her. The great dignity, however, of her teacher's manner, and the half-sorrowful, half-indignant look she bestowed on the excited girl, calmed her down after a time. Mrs. Willis felt full sympathy for Dora, and could well understand how trying and aggravating this practical joke must be to so proud a girl; but although her faith was undoubtedly shaken in Annie, she would not allow this sentiment to appear.

"I will do all I can for you, Dora," she said,

when the weeping Annie had left the room; "I will do everything in my power to find out who has injured you. Annie has absolutely denied the accusation you bring against her, and unless her guilt can be proved it is but right to believe her innocent. There are many other girls in Lavender House, and to-morrow morning I will sift this unpleasant affair to the very bottom. Go, now, my dear, and if you have sufficient self-command and self-control, try to have courage to write your essay over again. I have no doubt that your second rendering of your subject will be more attractive than the first. Beginners cannot too often re-write their themes."

Dora gave her head a proud little toss, but she was sufficiently in awe of Mrs. Willis to keep back any retort, and she went out of the room feeling unsatisfied and wretched, and inclined for a sympathising chat with her little friend, Hester Thornton.

Hester, however, when she reached her, seemed not at all disposed to talk to any one.

"I've had it all out with Mrs. Willis, and there is no doubt she will be exposed to-morrow morning," said Dora, half aloud.

Hester, whose head was bent over her French history, looked up with an annoyed expression.

"Who will be exposed?" she asked, in a petulant voice.

"Oh, how stupid you are growing, Hester Thornton!" exclaimed Dora; "why, that horrid Annie Forest, of course—but really I have no patience to talk to you; you have lost all your spirit. I was very foolish to demean myself by taking so much notice of one of the little girls."

Dora sailed down the playroom to her own drawing-room, fully expecting Hester to rise and rush after her; but to her surprise Hester did not stir, but sat with her head bent over her book, and her cheeks slightly flushed.

The next morning Mrs. Willis kept her word to Dora, and made the very strictest inquiries with regard to the practical joke to which Dora had been subjected. She first of all fully explained what had taken place in the presence of the whole school, and then each girl was called up in rotation, and asked two questions: first, had she done this mischievous thing herself? second, could she throw any light on the subject?

One by one each girl appeared before her teacher, replied in the negative to both queries, and returned to her seat.

"Now, girls," said Mrs. Willis, "you have each of you denied this charge. Such a thing as has happened to Dora could not have been done without hands. The teachers in the school are above suspicion; the servants are none of them clever enough to perform this base trick. I suspect one of you, and I am quite determined to get at the truth. During the whole of this half-year there has been a spirit of unhappiness, of mischief, and of suspicion in our midst. Under these circumstances love cannot thrive; under these circumstances the true and ennobling sense of brotherly kindness, and all those feelings which real religion prompt must languish. I tell you all now plainly that I will not have this thing in Lavender House. It is simply disgraceful for one girl to play such tricks on her fellows. This is not the first time

nor the second time that the school desks have been tampered with. I will find out—I am determined to find out, who this dishonest person is; and as she has not chosen to confess to me, as she has preferred falsehood to truth, I will visit her, when I do discover her, with my very gravest displeasure. In this school I have always endeavoured to inculcate the true principles of honour and of trust. I have laid down certain broad rules, and expect them to be obeyed; but I have never hampered you with petty and humiliating restraints. I have given you a certain freedom, which I believed to be for your best good, and I have never suspected one of you until you have given me due cause.

"Now, however, I tell you plainly that I alter all my tactics. One girl sitting in this room is guilty. For her sake I shall treat you all as guilty, and punish you accordingly. For the remainder of this term, or until the hour when the guilty girl chooses to release her companions, you are all, with the exception of the little children and Miss Russell, who can scarcely have played this trick on herself, under punishment. I withdraw your half-holidays—I take from you the use of the South Parlour for your acting, and every drawing-room in the playroom is confiscated. But this is not all that I do. In taking from you my trust, I must treat you as untrustworthy—you will no longer enjoy the liberty you used to delight in—everywhere you will be watched. A teacher will sit in your playroom with you, a teacher will accompany you into the grounds, and I tell you plainly, girls, that chance words and phrases which drop from

your lips shall be taken up, and used, if necessary, to the elucidation of this disgraceful mystery."

Here Mrs. Willis left the room, and the teachers desired the several girls in their classes to attend to their morning studies.

Nothing could exceed the dismay which her words had produced. The innocent girls were fairly stunned, and from that hour for many a day all sunshine and happiness seemed really to have left Lavender House.

The two, however, who felt the change most acutely, and on whose altered faces their companions began to fix suspicious eyes, were Annie Forest and Hester Thornton. Hester was burdened with an intolerable sense of the shameful falsehood she had told; Annie, guilty in another matter, succumbed at last utterly to a sense of misery and injustice. Her orphaned and lonely position for the first time began to tell on her: she ate little and slept little her face grew very pale and thin, and her health really suffered.

All the routine of happy life at Lavender House was changed. In the large playroom the drawing-rooms were unused; there were no pleasant little knots of girls whispering happily and confidentially together, for whenever two or three girls sat down to have a chat they found that one or another of the teachers was within hearing. The acting for the coming play progressed so languidly that no one expected it would really take place, and the one relief and relaxation to the unhappy girls lay in the fact that the holidays were not far off, and that in the meantime they might work hard for the prizes.

The days passed in a truly melancholy fashion, and, perhaps, for the first time the girls fully appreciated the old privileges of freedom and trust which were now forfeited. There was a feeble little attempt at a joke and a laugh in the school at Dora's expense. The most frivolous of the girls whispered of her as she passed as "the muddy stream;" but no one took up the fun with avidity —the shadow of somebody's sin had fallen too heavily upon all the bright young lives.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BETTY FALLS ILL AT AN AWKWARD TIME.

THE eight girls who had gone out on their midnight picnic were much startled one day by an unpleasant discovery. Betty had never come for her basket. Susan Drummond, who had a good deal of curiosity, and always poked her nose into unexpected corners, had been walking with a Miss Allison in that part of the grounds where the laurel-bush stood. She had caught a peep of the white handle of the basket, and had instantly turned her companion's attention to something else. Miss Allison had not observed Susan's start of dismay; but Susan had taken the first opportunity of getting rid of her, and had run off in search of one of the girls who had shared in the picnic. She came across Annie Forest, who was walking, as usual, by herself, with her head slightly bent, and her curling hair in sad confusion. Susan whispered the direful intelligence that old Betty had forsaken them, and that the basket, with its ginger

beer bottles and its stained table-cloth, might be discovered at any moment.

Annie's pale face flushed slightly at Susan's words.

"Why should we try to conceal the thing?" she said, speaking with sudden energy, and a look of hope and animation coming back to her face. "Susy, let's go, all of us, and tell the miserable truth to Mrs. Willis; it will be much the best way. We did not do the other thing, and when we have confessed about this our hearts will be at rest."

"No, we did not do the other thing," said Susan, a queer grey colour coming over her face; "but confess about this, Annie Forest!—I think you are mad. You dare not tell."

"All right," said Annie, "I won't, unless you all agree to it," and then she continued her walk, leaving Susan standing on the gravelled path with her hands clasped together, and a look of most genuine alarm and dismay on her usually phlegmatic face.

Susan quickly found Phyllis and Nora, and it was only too easy to arouse the fears of these timid little people. Their poor little faces became almost pallid, and they were not a little startled at the fact of Annie Forest, their own arch-conspirator, wishing to betray their secret.

"Oh," said Susan Drummond, "she's not out and out shabby; she says she won't tell unless we all wish it. But what is to become of the basket?"

"Come, come, young ladies; no whispering, if you please," said Miss Good, who came up at this moment. "Susan, you are looking pale and cold, walk up and down that path half-a-dozen times, and then go into the house. Phyllis and Nora, you can come with me as far as the lodge. I want to take a message

from Mrs. Willis to Mary Martin about the fowl for to-morrow's dinner."

Phyllis and Nora, with dismayed faces, walked solemnly away with the English teacher, and Susan was left to her solitary meditations.

Things had come to such a pass that her slow wits were brought into play, and she neither felt sleepy, nor did she indulge in her usual habit of eating lollipops.

That basket might be discovered any day, and then—then disgrace was imminent. Susan could not make out what had become of old Betty; never before had she so utterly failed them.

Betty lived in a little cottage about half a mile from Lavender House. She was a sturdy, apple-cheeked, little old woman, and had for many a day added to her income—indeed, almost supported herself—by means of the girls at Lavender House. The large cherry-trees in her little garden bore their rich crop of fruit year after year for Mrs. Willis's girls, and every day at an early hour Betty would tramp into Sefton and return with a temptingly-laden basket of the most approved cakes and tarts. There was a certain paling at one end of the grounds to which Betty used to come. Here on the grass she would sit contentedly, with the contents of her baskets arranged in the most tempting order before her, and to this seductive spot she knew well that those little Misses who loved goodies, cakes, and tartlets would be sure to find their way. Betty charged high for her wares; but, as she was always obliging in the matter of credit, the thoughtless girls cared very little that they paid double the shop prices for Betty's cakes. The best girls in the school, certainly, never went to Betty;

but Annie Forest, Susan Drummond, and several others had regular accounts with her, and few days passed that their young faces would not peep over the paling and their voices ask—

"What have you got to tempt me with to-day, Betty?"

It was, however, in the matter of stolen picnics, of grand feasts in the old attic, &c. &c., that Betty was truly great. No one so clever as she in concealing a basket of delicious eatables, no one knew better what schoolgirls liked. She undoubtedly charged her own prices, but what she gave was of the best, and Betty was truly in her element when she had an order from the young ladies of Lavender House for a grand secret feast.

"You shall have it, my pretties—you shall have it," she would say, wrinkling up her bright blue eyes, and smiling broadly. "You leave it to Betty, my little loves; you leave it to Betty."

On the occasion of the picnic to the fairies' field Betty had, indeed, surpassed herself in the delicious eatables she had provided; all had gone smoothly, the basket had been placed in a secure hiding-place under the thick laurel. It was to be fetched away by Betty herself at an early hour on the following morning.

No wonder Susan was perplexed as she paced about and pretended to warm herself. It was a June evening, but the weather was still a little cold. Susan remembered now that Betty had not come to her favourite station at the stile for several days. Was it possible that the old woman was ill? As this idea occurred to her, Susan became more alarmed. She knew that there was very little chance of the basket remaining long in concealment. Rover might any

day remember his pleasant picnic with affection, and drag the white basket from under the laurel-bush. Michael the gardener would be certain to see it when next he cleaned up the back avenue. Oh, it was more than dangerous to leave it there, and yet Susan knew of no better hiding-place. A sudden idea came to her; she pulled out her pretty little watch, and saw that she need not return to the house for another half-hour. "Suppose she ran as fast as possible to Betty's little cottage, and begged of the old woman to come by the first light in the morning and fetch away the basket?"

The moment Susan conceived this idea she resolved to put it into execution. She looked around her hastily: no teacher was in sight, Miss Good was away at the lodge, Miss Danesbury was playing with the little children. Mademoiselle, she knew, had gone indoors with a bad headache. She left the broad walk where she had been desired to stay, and, plunging into the shrubbery, soon reached Betty's paling. In a moment she had climbed the bars, had jumped lightly into the field, and was running as fast as possible in the direction of Betty's cottage. She reached the high road, and started and trembled violently as a carriage with some ladies and gentlemen passed her. She thought she recognised the faces of the two little Misses Bruce, but did not dare to look at them, and hurried panting along the road, and hoping she might be mistaken.

In less than a quarter of an hour she had reached Betty's little cottage, and was standing trying to recover her breath by the shut door. The place had a deserted look, and several overripe cherries had fallen from the trees and were lying neglected on the ground. Susan knocked impatiently. There was no

discernible answer. She had no time to wait, she lifted the latch, which yielded to her pressure, and went in.

Poor old Betty, crippled, and in severe pain with rheumatism, was lying on her little bed.

"Eh, dear—and is that you, my pretty Missy?" she asked, as Susan, hot and tired, came up to her side.

"Oh, Betty, are you ill?" asked Miss Drummond. "I came to tell you you have forgotten the basket."

"No, my dear, no—not forgot. By no means that, lovey; but I has been took with the rheumatism this past week, and can't move hand nor foot. I was wondering how you'd do without your cakes and tartlets, dear, and to think of them cherries lying there good for nothing on the ground is enough to break one's 'eart."

"So it is," said Susan, giving an appreciative glance towards the open door. "They are beautiful cherries, and full of juice, I am sure. I'll take a few, Betty, as I am going out, and pay you for them another day. But what I have come about now is the basket. You must get the basket away, however ill you are. If the basket is discovered we are all lost, and then good-bye to your gains."

"Well, Missy, dear, if I could crawl on my hands and knees I'd go and fetch it, rather than you should be worried; but I can't set foot to the ground at all. The doctor says as 'tis somethink like rheumatic fever as I has."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear," said Susan, not wasting any of her precious moments in pitying the poor suffering old woman. "What *is* to be done? I tell you, Betty, if that basket is found we are all lost."

"But the laurel is very thick, lovey; it aint likely to be found—it aint, indeed."

"I tell you it *is* likely to be found, you tiresome old woman, and you really must go for it or send for it. You really must."

Old Betty began to ponder.

"There's Moses," she said, after a pause of anxious thought; "he's a 'cute little chap and he might go. He lives in the fourth cottage along the lane. Moses is his name—Moses Moore. I'd give him a pint of cherries for the job. If you wouldn't mind sending Moses to me, Miss Susan, why, I'll do my best; only it seems a pity to let anybody into your secrets, young ladies, but old Betty herself."

"It is a pity," said Susan; "but, under the circumstances, it can't be helped. What cottage did you say this Moses lived in?"

"The fourth from here, down the lane, lovey—Moses is the lad's name; he a freckled boy, with a cast in one eye. You send him up to me, dearie; but don't mention the cherries, or he'll be after stealing them. He's a sad rogue, is Moses; but I think I can tempt him with the cherries."

Susan did not wait to bid poor old Betty "good-bye," but ran out of the cottage, shutting the door after her, and snatching up two or three ripe cherries to eat on her way. She was so far fortunate as to find the redoubtable Moses at home, and to convey him bodily to old Betty's presence. The queer boy grinned horribly, and looked as wicked as boy could look; but on the subject of cherries he was undoubtedly susceptible, and after a good deal of haggling and insisting that the pint should be a quart, he expressed his willingness to start off at four o'clock on the following morning, and bring away the basket from under the laurel-tree.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"YOU ARE WELCOME TO TELL.

ANNIE continued her walk. The circumstances of the last two months had combined to do for her what nothing had hitherto effected. When a little child she had known hardship and privation, she had passed through that experience which is metaphorically spoken of as "going down hill." As a baby little Annie had been surrounded by comforts and luxuries, and her father and mother had lived in a large house, and kept a carriage, and Annie had two nurses to wait on herself alone. These were in the days before she could remember anything. With her first early memories came the recollection of a much smaller house, of much fewer servants, of her mother often in tears, and her father often away. Then there was no house at all that the Forests could call their own, only rooms of a tolerably cheerful character—and Annie's nurse went away, and she took her daily walks by her mother's side and slept in a little cot in her mother's room. Then came a very, very sad day, when her mother lay cold and still and fainting on her bed, and her tall and handsome father caught Annie in his arms and pressed her to his heart, and told her to be a good child and to keep up her spirits, and, above all things, to take care of mother. Then her father had gone away; and though Annie expected him back, he did not come, and she and her mother went into poorer and shabbier lodgings, and her mother began to try her tear-dimmed eyes by working at church embroidery,

and Annie used to notice that she coughed a good deal as she worked. Then there was another move, and this time Mrs. Forest and her little daughter found themselves in one bedroom, and things began to grow very gloomy, and food even was scarce. At last there was a change. One day a lady came into the dingy little room, and all on a sudden it seemed as if the sun had come out again. This lady brought comforts with her—toys and books for the child, good, brave words of cheer for the mother. At last, Annie's mother died, and she went away to Lavender House to live with this good friend who had made her mother's dying hours easy.

"Annie, Annie," said the dying mother, "I owe everything to Mrs. Willis; we knew each other long ago when we were girls, and she has come to me now and made everything easy. When I am gone she will take care of you. Oh, my child, I cannot repay her; but will you try?"

"Yes, mother," said little Annie, gazing full into her mother's face with her sweet bright eyes, "I'll —I'll love her, mother; I'll give her lots and lots of love."

Annie had gone to Lavender House, and kept her word, for she had almost worshipped the good mistress who was so true and kind to her, and who had so befriended her mother. Through all the vicissitudes of her short existence Annie had, however, never lost one precious gift. Hers was an affectionate, but also a wonderfully bright, nature. It was as impossible for Annie to turn away from laughter and merriment as it would be for a flower to keep its head determinately turned from the sun. In their darkest days Annie had managed to make

her mother laugh ; her little face was a sunbeam, her very naughtinesses were of a laughable character.

Her mother died—her father was still away, but Annie retained her brave and cheerful spirit, for she gave and received love. Mrs. Willis loved her—she bestowed upon her amongst all her girls the tenderest glances, the most motherly caresses. The teachers undoubtedly corrected and even scolded her, but they could not help liking her, and even her worst scrapes made them smile. Annie's companions adored her ; the little children would do anything for their own Annie, and even the servants in the school said that there was no young lady in Lavender House fit to hold a candle to Miss Forest.

During the last half-year, however, things had been different. Suspicion and mistrust began to dog the footsteps of the bright young girl ; she was no longer a universal favourite—some of the girls even openly expressed their dislike of her.

All this Annie could have borne, but for the fact that Mrs. Willis joined in the universal suspicion. The old glance now never came to her eyes, nor the old tone to her voice. For the first time Annie's spirits utterly flagged ; she could not bear this universal coldness, this universal chill. She began to droop physically as well as mentally.

She was pacing up and down the walk, thinking very sadly, wondering vaguely if her father would ever return, and conscious of a feeling of more or less indifference to everything and every one, when she was suddenly roused from her meditation by the patter of small feet and by a very eager little exclamation—

"Me tumming—me tumming, Annie!" and then

Nan raised her charming face and placed her cool baby hand in Annie's.

There was delicious comfort in the clasp of the little hand, and in the look of love and pleasure which lit up the small face.

"Me yiding from naughty nurse—me 'tay with you, Annie—me love 'oo, Annie."

Annie stooped down, kissed the little one, and lifted her into her arms.

"Why ky?" said Nan, who saw with consternation two big tears in Annie's eyes; "dere, poor ickle Annie—me love 'oo—me buy 'oo a new doll."

"Dearest little darling," said Annie in a voice of almost passionate pain; then, with that wonderful instinct which made her in touch with all little children, she cheered up, wiped away her tears, and allowed laughter once more to wreathe her lips and fill her eyes. "Come, Nan," she said, "you and I will have such a race."

She placed the child on her shoulder, clasped the little hands securely round her neck, and ran to the sound of Nan's shouts down the shady walk.

At the farther end Nan suddenly tightened her clasp, drew herself up, ceased to laugh, and said with some fright in her voice—

"Who dat?"

Annie, too, stood still with a sudden start, for the gipsy woman, Mother Rachel, was standing directly in their path.

"Go 'way, naughty woman," said Nan, shaking her small hand imperiously.

The gipsy dropped a low curtsey, and spoke in a slightly mocking tone.

"A pretty little dear," she said. "Yes, truly now,

a pretty little winsome dear; and oh, what shoes! and little open-work socks! and I don't doubt real lace trimming on all her little garments—I don't doubt it a bit."

"Go 'way—me don't like 'oo," said Nan. "Let's wun back—gee, gee," she said, addressing Annie, whom she had constituted into a horse for the time being.

"Yes, Nan; in one minute," said Annie. "Please, Mother Rachel, what are you doing here?"

"Only waiting to see you, pretty Missie," replied the tall gipsy. "You are the dear little lady who crossed my hand with silver that night in the wood. Eh, but it was a bonny night, with a bonny bright moon, and none of the dear little ladies meant any harm—no, no, Mother Rachel knows that."

"Look here," said Annie, "I'm not going to be afraid of you. I have no more silver to give you. If you like, you may go up to the house and tell what you have seen. I am very unhappy, and whether you tell or not can make very little difference to me now. Good-night; I am not the least afraid of you—you can do just as you please about telling Mrs. Willis."

"Eh, my dear?" said the gipsy; "do you think I'd work you any harm—you, and the seven other dear little ladies? No, not for the world, my dear—not for the world. You don't know Mother Rachel when you think she'd be that mean."

"Well, don't come here again," said Annie. "Good-night."

She turned on her heel, and Nan shouted back—

"Go 'way, naughty woman—Nan don't love 'oo, 'tall, 'tall."

The gipsy stood still for a moment with a frown

knitting her brows; then she slowly turned, and, creeping on all-fours through the underwood, climbed the hedge into the field beyond.

"Oh, no," she laughed, after a moment; "the little Missy thinks she aint afraid of me; but she be. Trust Mother Rachel for knowing that much. I make no doubt," she added after a pause, "that the little one's clothes are trimmed with real lace. Well, little Missie Annie Forest, I can see with half an eye that you set store by that baby-girl. You had better not cross Mother Rachel's whims, or she can punish you in a way you don't think of."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HOW MOSES MOORE KEPT HIS APPOINTMENT.

Susan Drummond got back to Lavender House without apparent discovery. She was certainly late when she took her place in the class-room for her next day's preparation; but, beyond a very sharp reprimand from Mademoiselle, no notice was taken of this fact. She managed to whisper to Nora and Phyllis that the basket would be moved by the first dawn the next morning, and the little girls went to bed happier in consequence. Nothing ever could disturb Susan's slumbers, and that night she certainly slept without rocking. As she was getting into bed she ventured to tell Annie how successfully she had manœuvred; but Annie received her news with the most absolute indifference, looking at her for a moment with a queer smile, and then saying—

"My own wish is that this should be found out.

As a matter of course, I sha'n't betray you, girls; but as things now stand I am anxious that Mrs. Willis should know the very worst of me."

After a remark which Susan considered so simply idiotic, there was, of course, no further conversation between the two girls.

Moses Moore had certainly promised Betty to rise soon after dawn on the following morning and go to Lavender House to carry off the basket from under the laurel-tree. Moses, a remarkably indolent lad, had been stimulated by the thought of the delicious cherries which would be his as soon as he brought the basket to Betty. He had cleverly stipulated that a quart—not a pint—of cherries was to be his reward, and he looked forward with considerable pleasure to picking them himself, and putting a few extra ones into his mouth on the sly.

Moses was not at all the kind of boy who would have scrupled to steal a few cherries; but in this particular old Betty, ill as she was, was too sharp for him, or for any of the other village lads. Her bed was drawn up close to her little window, and her window looked directly on to the two cherry trees. Never, to all appearance, did Betty close her eyes. However early the hour might be in which a village boy peeped over the wall of her garden, he always saw her white night-cap moving, and he knew that her bright blue eyes would be on him, and he would be proclaimed a thief all over the place before many minutes were over.

Moses, therefore, was very glad to secure his cherries by fair means, as he could not obtain them by foul; and he went to bed and to sleep determined to be off on his errand with the dawn.

A very natural thing, however, happened. Moses, unaccustomed to getting up at half-past three in the morning, never opened his eyes until the church clock struck five. Then he started upright, rubbed and rubbed at his sleepy orbs, tumbled into his clothes, and, softly opening the cottage door, set off on his errand.

The fact of his being nearly an hour and a half late did not trouble him in the least. In any case, he would get to Lavender House before six o'clock, and would have consumed his cherries in less than an hour from that date.

Moses sauntered gaily along the roads, whistling as he went, and occasionally tossing his battered cap in the air. He often lingered on his way, now to cut down a particularly tempting switch from the hedge, now to hunt for a possible bird's nest. It was very nearly six o'clock when he reached the back avenue, swung himself over the gate, which was locked, and ran softly on the dewy grass in the direction of the laurel bush. Old Betty had given him most careful instructions, and he was far too sharp a lad to forget what was necessary for the obtaining of a quart of cherries. He found his tree, and lay flat down on the ground in order to pull out the basket. His fingers had just clasped the handle when there came a sudden interruption—a rush, a growl, and some very sharp teeth had inserted themselves into the back of his ragged jacket. Poor Moses found himself, to his horror, in the clutches of a great mastiff. The creature held him tight, and laid one heavy paw on him to prevent him rising.

Under these circumstances, Moses thought it quite unnecessary to retain any self-control. He shrieked,

he screamed, he wriggled ; his piercing yells filled the air, and, fortunately for him, his being two hours too late brought assistance to his aid. Michael, the gardener, and a strong boy who helped him, rushed to the spot, and liberated the terrified lad, who, after all, was only frightened, for Rover had satisfied himself with tearing his jacket to pieces, not himself.

"Give me the b-basket," sobbed Moses, "and let me g-g-go."

"You may certainly go, you little tramp," said Michael, "but Jim and me will keep the basket. I much misdoubt me if there isn't mischief here. What's the basket put hiding here for, and who does it belong to ?"

"Old B-B-Betty," gasped forth the agitated Moses.

"Well, let old Betty fetch it herself. Mrs. Willis will keep it for her," said Michael. "Come along, Jim, get to your weeding, do. There, little scamp, you had better make yourself scarce."

Moses certainly took his advice, for he scuttled off like a hare. Whether he ever got his cherries or not, history does not disclose.

Michael, looking gravely at Jim, opened the basket, examined its contents, and, shaking his head solemnly, carried it into the house.

"There's been deep work going on, Jim, and my Missis ought to know," said Michael, who was an exceedingly strict disciplinarian. Jim, however, had a soft corner in his heart for the young ladies, and he commenced his weeding with a profound sigh.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A BROKEN TRUST.

THE next morning Annie Forest opened her eyes with that strange feeling of indifference and want of vivacity which come so seldom to youth. She saw the sun shining through the closed blinds; she heard the birds twittering and singing in the large elm-tree which nearly touched the windows; she knew well how the world looked at this moment, for often and often in her old light-hearted days she had risen before the maid came to call her, and, kneeling by the deep window-ledge, had looked out at the bright, fresh, sparkling day. A new day, with all its hours before it, its light vivid but not too glaring, its dress all manner of tender shades and harmonious colourings! Annie had a poetical nature, and she gloried in these glimpses which she got all by herself of the fresh, glad world.

To-day, however, she lay still, sorry to know that the brief night was at an end, and that the day, with its coldness and suspicion, its terrible absence of love and harmony, was about to begin.

Annie's nature was very emotional; she was intensely sensitive to her surroundings; the greyness of her present life was absolute destruction to such a nature as hers.

The dressing-bell rang; the maid came in to draw up the blinds, and call the girls. Annie rose languidly, and began to dress herself.

She first finished her toilet, and then approached

her little bed, and stood by its side for a moment hesitating. She did not want to pray, and yet she felt impelled to go down on her knees. As she knelt, with her curls falling about her face, and her hands pressed to her eyes, one line of one of her favourite poems came flashing with swiftness and power across her memory—

"A soul which has sinned and is pardoned again."

The words filled her whole heart with a sudden sense of peace and of great longing.

The prayer-bell rang: she rose, and, turning to Susan Drummond, said earnestly—

"Oh, Susy, I do wish Mrs. Willis could know about our going to the fairy-field; I do so want God to forgive me."

Susan stared in her usual dull, uncomprehending way; then she flushed a little, and said brusquely—

"I think you have quite taken leave of your senses, Annie Forest."

Annie said no more, but at prayers in the chapel she was glad to find herself near gentle Cecil Temple, and the words kept repeating themselves to her all during the morning lessons—

"A soul which has sinned and is pardoned again."

Just before morning school, several of the girls started and looked distressed when they found that Mrs. Willis lingered in the room. She stood for a moment by the English teacher's desk, said something to her in a low voice, and then, walking slowly to her own post at the head of the great school-room, she said suddenly—

"I want to ask you a question, Miss Drummond. Will you please just stand up in your place in

class and answer me without a moment's hesitation?"

Phyllis and Nora found themselves turning very pale; Mary Price and one or two more of the rebels also began to tremble, but Susan looked dogged and indifferent enough as she turned her eyes towards her teacher.

"Yes, madam," she said, rising and dropping a curtsey.

"My friends, the Misses Bruce, came to call on me yesterday evening, Susan, and told me that they saw you running very quickly on the high road in the direction of the village. You, of course, know that you broke a very distinct rule when you left the grounds without leave. Tell me at once where you were going."

Susan hesitated, coloured to her dullest red, and looked down. Then, because she had no ready excuse to offer, she blurted out the truth—

"I was going to see old Betty."

"The cake-woman?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"I—I heard she was ill."

"Indeed—you may sit down, Miss Drummond. Miss Good, will you ask Michael to step for a moment into the schoolroom?"

Several of the girls now indeed held their breath, and more than one heart beat with heavy, frightened bumps as a moment later Michael followed Miss Good into the room, carrying the redoubtable picnic-basket on his arm.

"Michael," said Mrs. Willis, "I wish you to tell the young ladies exactly how you found the basket

this morning. Stand by my side, please, and speak loud enough for them to hear."

After a moment's pause Michael related somewhat diffusely and with an occasional break in his narrative the scene which had occurred between him and Moses that morning.

"That will do, Michael; you can now go," said the head-mistress.

She waited until the old servant had closed the door, and then she turned to her girls—

"It is not quite a fortnight since I stood where I now stand, and asked one girl to be honourable and to save her companions. One girl was guilty of sin and would not confess, and for her sake all her companions are now suffering. I am tired of this sort of thing—I am tired of standing in this place and appealing to your honour, which is dead, to your truth, which is nowhere. Girls, you puzzle me—you half break my heart. In this case more than one is guilty. How many of the girls in Lavender House are going to tell me a lie this morning?"

There was a very brief pause; then a slight cry, and a girl rose from her seat and walked up the long schoolroom.

"I am the most guilty of all," said Annie Forest.

"Annie!" said Mrs. Willis, in a tone half of pain, half of relief, "have you come to your senses at last?"

"Oh, I'm so glad to be able to speak the truth," said Annie. "Please punish me very, very hard; I am the most guilty of all."

"What did you do with this basket?"

"We took it for a picnic—it was my plan, I led the others."

"Where was your picnic?"

"In the fairies' field."

"Ah! At what time?"

"At night—in the middle of the night—the night you went to London."

Mrs. Willis put her hand to her brow; her face was very white and the girls could see that she trembled.

"I trusted my girls——" she said; then she broke off abruptly.

"You had companions in this wickedness—name them."

"Yes, I had companions; I led them on."

"Name them, Miss Forest."

For the first time Annie raised her eyes to Mrs. Willis's face; then she turned and looked down the long schoolroom.

"Oh, won't they tell themselves?" she said.

Nothing could be more appealing than her glance. It melted the hearts of Phyllis and Nora, who began to sob, and to declare brokenly that they had gone too, and that they were very, very sorry.

Spurred by their example Mary Price also confessed, and one by one all the little conspirators revealed the truth, with the exception of Susan, who kept her eyes steadily fixed on the floor.

"Susan Drummond," said Mrs. Willis, "come here."

There was something in her tone which startled every girl in the school. Never had they heard this ring in their teacher's voice before.

"Susan," said Mrs. Willis, "I don't ask you if you are guilty; I fear, poor miserable girl, that if I did you would load your conscience with a fresh

lie. I don't ask you if you are guilty because I know you are. The fact of your running without leave to see old Betty is circumstantial evidence. I judge you by that and pronounce you guilty. Now, young ladies, you who have treated me so badly, who have betrayed my trust, who have been wanting in honour, I must think, I must ask God to teach me how to deal with you. In the meantime, you cannot associate with your companions. Miss Good, will you take each of these eight girls to their bedrooms."

As Annie was leaving the room she looked full into Mrs. Willis's face. Strange to say, at this moment of her great disgrace the cloud which had so long brooded over her was lifted. The sweet eyes never looked sweeter. The old Annie, and yet a better and a braver Annie than had ever existed before, followed her companions out of the school-room.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IS SHE STILL GUILTY?

ON the evening of that day Cecil Temple knocked at the door of Mrs. Willis's private sitting-room.

"Ah, Cecil! is that you?" said her governess. "I am always glad to see you, dear; but I happen to be particularly busy to-night. Have you anything in particular to say to me?"

"I only wanted to talk about Annie, Mrs. Willis. You believe in her at last, don't you?"

"Believe in her at last!" said the head-mistress in

a tone of astonishment and deep pain. "No, Cecil, my dear; you ask too much of my faith. I do not believe in Annie."

Cecil paused; she hesitated, and seemed half afraid to proceed.

"Perhaps," she said at last in a slightly timid tone, "you have not seen her since this morning?"

"No; I have been particularly busy. Besides, the eight culprits are under punishment; part of their punishment is that I will not see them."

"Don't you think, Mrs. Willis," said Cecil, "that Annie made rather a brave confession this morning?"

"I admit, my dear, that Annie spoke in somewhat of her old impulsive way; she blamed herself, and did not try to screen her misdemeanours behind her companions. In this one particular she reminded me of the old Annie who, notwithstanding all her faults, I used to trust and love. But as to her confession being very brave, my dear Cecil, you must remember that she did not *confess* until she was obliged; she knew, and so did all the other girls, that I could have got the truth out of old Betty had they chosen to keep their lips sealed. Then, my dear, consider what she did. On the very night that I was away she violated the trust I had in her—she bade me 'good-bye' with smiles and sweet glances, and then she did this in my absence. No, Cecil, I fear poor Annie is not what we thought her. She has done untold mischief during the half-year, and has wilfully lied and deceived me. I find, on comparing dates, that it was on the very night of the girls' pic-nic that Dora's theme was changed. There is no doubt whatever that Annie was the guilty person. I did my best

to believe in her, and to depend on Mr. Everard's judgment of her character, but I confess I can do so no longer. Cecil, dear, I am not surprised that you look pale and sad. No, we will not give up this poor Annie: we will try to love her even through her sin. Ah! poor child, poor child! how much I have prayed for her! She was to me as a child of my own. Now, dear Cecil, I must ask you to leave me."

Cecil went slowly out of her governess's presence, and, wandering across the wide stone hall, she entered the playroom. It happened to be a wet night, and the room was full of girls, who hung together in groups and whispered softly. There were no loud voices, and, except from the little ones, there was no laughter. A great depression hung over the place, and few could have recognised the happy girls of Lavender House in these sad young faces. Cecil walked slowly into the room, and presently finding Hester Thornton, she sat down by her side.

"I can't get Mrs. Willis to see it," she said very sadly.

"What?" asked Hester.

"Why, that we have got our old Annie back again; that she did take the girls out to that pic-nic, and was as wild, and reckless, and naughty as possible about it; and then, just like the old Annie I have always known, the moment the fun was over she began to repent, and that she has gone on repenting ever since, which has accounted for her poor sad little face and white cheeks. Of course she longed to tell—Nora and Phyllis have told me so—but she would not betray them. Now at last there is a load off her heart, and, though she is in great

disgrace and punishment, she is not very unhappy. I went to see her an hour ago, and I saw in her face that my own darling Annie has returned. But what do you think Mrs. Willis does, Hester? She is so hurt and disappointed, that she believes Annie is guilty of the other thing—she believes that Annie stole Dora's theme, and that she caricatured her in my book some time ago. She believes it—she is sure of it. Now, do you think, Hester, that Annie's face would look quite peaceful and happy to-night if she had only confessed half her faults—if she had this meanness, this sin, these lies still resting on her soul? Oh! I wish Mrs. Willis would see her! I wish—I wish! but I can do nothing. You agree with me, don't you, Hester? Just put yourself in Annie's place, and tell me if *you* would feel happy, and if your heart would be at rest, if you had only confessed half your sin, and if through you all your school-fellows were under disgrace and suspicion? You could not, could you, Hester? Why, Hester, how white you are!"

"You are so metaphysical," said Hester, rising; "you quite puzzle me. How can I put myself in your friend Annie's place? I never understood her—I never wanted to. Put myself in her place?—no, certainly that I'm never likely to. I hope that I shall never be in such a predicament."

Hester walked away, and Cecil sat still in great perplexity.

Cecil was a girl with a true sense of religion. The love of God guided every action of her simple and straightforward life. She was neither beautiful nor clever; but no one in the school was more respected and honoured, no one more sincerely loved. Cecil

knew what the peace of God meant, and when she saw even a shadowy reflection of that peace on Annie's little face, she was right in believing that she must be innocent of the guilt which was attributed to her.

The whole school assembled for prayers that night in the little chapel, and Mr. Everard, who had heard the story of that day's confession from Mrs. Willis, said a few words appropriate to the occasion to the unhappy young girls.

Whatever effect his words had on the others, and they were very simple and straightforward, Annie's face grew quiet and peaceful as she listened to them. The old clergyman assured the girls that God was waiting to forgive those who truly repented, and that the way to repent was to rise up and sin no more.

"The present fun is not worth the after-pain," he said, in conclusion. "It is an old saying that stolen waters are sweet, but only at the time; afterwards only those who drink of them know the full extent of their bitterness."

This little address from Mr. Everard strengthened poor Annie for an ordeal which was immediately before her, for Mrs. Willis asked all the school to follow her to the playroom, and there she told them that she was about to restore to them their lost privileges; that circumstances, in her opinion, now so strongly pointed the guilt of the stolen essay in the direction of one girl, that she could no longer ask the school to suffer for her sake.

"She still refuses to confess her sin," said Mrs. Willis, "but, unless another girl proclaims herself guilty, and proves to me beyond doubt that she drew the caricature which was found in Cecil Temple's book,

and that she changed Dora Russell's essay, and, imitating her hand, put another in its place, I proclaim the guilty person to be Annie Forest, and on her alone I visit my displeasure. You can retire to your rooms, young ladies. To-morrow morning Lavender House resumes its old cheerfulness."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HESTER'S HOUR OF TRIAL.

However calmly or however peacefully Annie slept that night, poor Hester did not close her eyes. The white face of the girl she had wronged and injured kept rising before her. Why had she so deceived Annie? Why from the very first had she turned from her, and misjudged her, and misrepresented her? Was Annie, indeed, all bad? Hester had to own to herself that to-night Annie was better than she—was greater than she. Could she now have undone the past, she would not have acted as she had done; she would not for the sake of a little paltry revenge have defiled her conscience with a lie, have told her governess that she could throw no light on the circumstance of the stolen essay. This was the first lie Hester had ever told; she was naturally both straightforward and honourable, but her sin of sins, that which made her hard and almost unlovable, was an intensely proud and haughty spirit. She was very sorry she had told that lie, she was very sorry she had yielded to that temptation; but not for worlds would she now humble herself to confess—not for worlds would she let the school know of her cowardice and

shame. No, if there was no other means of clearing Annie except through her confession, she must remain with the shadow of this sin over her to her dying day.

Hester, however, was now really unhappy, and also truly sorry for poor Annie. Could she have got off without disgrace or punishment, she would have been truly glad to see Annie exonerated. She was quite certain that Susan Drummond was at the bottom of all the mischief which had been done lately at Lavender House. She could not make out how stupid Susan was clever enough to caricature and to imitate peoples' hands. Still she was convinced that she was the guilty person, and she wondered and wondered if she could induce Susan to come forward and confess the truth, and so save Annie without bringing her, Hester, into any trouble.

She resolved to speak to Susan, and without confessing that she had been in the schoolroom on the night the essay was changed, to let her know plainly that she suspected her.

She became much calmer when she determined to carry out this resolve, and towards morning she fell asleep.

She was awakened at a very early hour by little Nan clambering over the side of her crib, and cuddling down cosily in a way she loved by Hester's side.

"Me so 'nug, 'nug," said little Nan. "Oh, Hetty, Hetty, there's a wy on the teiling!"

Hester had then to rouse herself, and enter into an animated conversation on the subject of flies generally, and in especial she had to talk of that particular fly which would perambulate on the ceiling over Nan's head.

"Me like wies," said Nan, "and me like 'oo, Hetty, and me love—me love Annie."

Hester kissed her little sister passionately; but this last observation, accompanied by the expression of almost angelic devotion which filled little Nan's brown eyes, as she repeated that she liked flies and Hetty, but that she loved Annie, had the effect of again hardening her heart.

Hester's hour of trial, however, was at hand, and before that day was over she was to experience that awful emptiness and desolation which those know whom God is punishing.

Lessons went on as usual at Lavender House that morning, and, to the surprise of several, Annie was seen in her old place in class. She worked with a steadiness quite new to her; no longer interlarding her hours of study with those indescribable glances of fun and mischief, first at one school-companion and then at another, which used to worry her teachers so much.

There were no merry glances from Annie that morning; but she worked steadily and rapidly, and went through that trying ordeal, her French verbs, with such satisfaction that Mademoiselle was on the point of praising her, until she remembered that Annie was in disgrace.

After school, however, Annie did not join her companions in the grounds, but went up to her bedroom, where, by Mrs. Willis's orders, she was to remain until the girls went in. She was to take her own exercise later in the day.

It was now the tenth of June—an intensely sultry day; a misty heat brooded over everything, and not a breath of air stirred the leaves in the trees. The girls

wandered about languidly, too enervated by the heat to care to join in any noisy games. They were now restored to their full freedom, and there is no doubt they enjoyed the privileges of having little confabs. and whispering secrets to each other without having Miss Good and Miss Danesbury for ever at their elbows. They talked of many things—of the near approach of the holidays, of the prize day which was now so close at hand, of Annie's disgrace, and so on.

They wondered, many of them, if Annie would ever be brought to confess her sin, and, if not, how Mrs. Willis would act towards her. Dora Russell said in her most contemptuous tones—

"She is nothing, after all, but a charity child, and Mrs. Willis has supported her for years for nothing."

"Yes, and she's too clever by half; eh, poor old Muddy Stream?" remarked a saucy little girl. "By the way, Dora, dear, how goes the river now?—has it lost itself in the arms of mother ocean yet?"

Dora turned red and walked away, and her young tormentor exclaimed with considerable gusto—

"There, I have silenced her for a bit; I do hate the way she talks about charity children. Whatever her faults, Annie is the sweetest and prettiest girl in the school, in my opinion."

In the meantime Hester was looking in all directions for Susan Drummond. She thought the present a very fitting opportunity to open her attack on her, and she was the more anxious to bring her to reason as a certain look in Annie's face—a pallid and very weary look—had gone to her heart, and touched her in spite of herself. Now, even though little Nan loved her, Hester would save Annie could she do so not at her own expense.

Look, however, as she would, nowhere could she find Miss Drummond. She called and called, but no sleepy voice replied. Susan, indeed, knew better; she had curled herself up in a hammock which hung between the boughs of a shady tree, and though Hester passed under her very head, she was sucking lollipops and going off comfortably into the land of dreams, and had no intention of replying. Hester wandered down the shady walk, and at its farther end she was gratified by the sight of little Nan, who, under her nurse's charge, was trying to string daisies on the grass. Hester sat down by her side, and Nan climbed over and made fine havoc of her neat print dress, and laughed, and was at her merriest and best.

"I hear say that that naughty Miss Forest has done something out-and-out disgraceful," whispered the nurse.

"Oh, don't!" said Hester impatiently. "Why should every one throw mud at a girl when she is down? If poor Annie is naughty and guilty, she is suffering now."

"Annie *not* naughty," said little Nan. "Me love my own Annie; me do, me do."

"And you love your own poor old nurse, too?" responded the somewhat jealous nurse.

Hester left the two playing happily together, the little one caressing her nurse, and blowing one or two kisses after her sister's retreating form. Hester returned to the house, and went up to her room to prepare for dinner. She had washed her hands, and was standing before the looking-glass re-plaiting her long hair, when Susan Drummond, looking extremely wild and excited, and with her eyes almost starting out of her head, rushed into the room.

"Oh, Hester, Hester!" she gasped, and she flung herself on Hester's bed, with her face downwards; she seemed absolutely deprived for the moment of the power of any further speech.

"What is the matter, Susan?" inquired Hester half impatiently. "What have you come into my room for? Are you going into a fit of hysterics? You had better control yourself, for the dinner gong will sound directly."

Susan gasped two or three times, made a rush to Hester's washhand-stand, and, taking up a glass, poured some cold water into it, and gulped it down.

"Now I can speak," she said. "I ran so fast that my breath quite left me. Hester, put on your walking things or go without them, just as you please—only go at once if you would save her."

"Save whom?" asked Hester.

"Your little sister—little Nan. I—I saw it all. I was in the hammock, and nobody knew I was there, and somehow I wasn't so sleepy as usual, and I heard Nan's voice, and I looked over the side of the hammock, and she was sitting on the grass picking daisies, and her nurse was with her, and presently you came up. I heard you calling me, but I wasn't going to answer. I felt too comfortable. You stayed with Nan and her nurse for a little, and then went away; and I heard Nan's nurse say to her: 'Sit here, Missy, till I come back to you; I am going to fetch another reel of sewing cotton from the house. Sit still, Missy; I'll be back directly.' She went away, and Nan went on picking her daisies. All on a sudden I heard Nan give a sharp little cry, and I looked over the hammock, and there was a tall dark woman, with such a wicked face, and she snatched up Nan

in her arms, and put a thick shawl over her face, and ran off with her. It was all done in an instant. I shouted, and I scrambled out of the hammock, and I rushed down the path; but there wasn't a sign of anybody there. I don't know where the woman went —it seemed as if the earth swallowed up both her and little Nan. Why, Hester, are you going to faint?"

"Water!" gasped Hester—"one sip—now let me go."

CHAPTER XL.

A GIPSY MAID.

In a few moments every one in Lavender House was made acquainted with Susan's story. At such a time ceremony was laid aside, dinner forgotten, teachers, pupils, servants all congregated in the grounds, all rushed to the spot where Nan's withered daisies still lay, all peered through the underwood, and all, alas! looked in vain for the tall dark woman and the little child. Little Nan, the baby of the school, had been stolen—there were loud and terrified lamentations. Nan's nurse was almost tearing her hair, was rushing frantically here, there, and everywhere. No one blamed the nurse for leaving her little charge in apparent safety for a few moments, but the poor woman's own distress was pitiable to see. Mrs. Willis took Hester's hand, and told the poor stunned girl that she was sending to Sefton immediately for two or three policemen, and that in the meantime every man on the place should commence the search for the woman and child.

"Without any doubt," Mrs. Willis added, "we shall

soon have our little Nan back again; it is quite impossible that the woman, whoever she is, can have taken her so far away in so short a time."

In the meantime, Annie in her bed-room heard the fuss and the noise. She leaned out of her window and saw Phyllis in the distance; she called to her. Phyllis ran up, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Oh, something so dreadful!" she gasped; "a wicked, wicked woman has stolen little Nan Thornton. She ran off with her just where the undergrowth is so thick at the end of the shady walk. It happened to her half an hour ago, and they are all looking, but they cannot find the woman or little Nan anywhere. Oh, it is so dreadful! Is that you, Mary?"

Phyllis ran off to join her sister, and Annie put her head in again, and looked round her pretty room.

"The gipsy," she murmured, "the tall, dark gipsy has taken little Nan!"

Her face was very white, her eyes shone, her lips expressed a firm and almost obstinate determination. With all her usual impulsiveness, she decided on a course of action—she snatched up a piece of paper and scribbled a hasty line:

"Dear Mother-friend,—However badly you think of Annie, Annie loves you with all her heart. Forgive me, I must go myself to look for little Nan. That tall, dark woman is a gipsy—I have seen her before; her name is Mother Rachel. Tell Hetty I won't return until I bring her little sister back.—Your repentant and sorrowful "Annie."

Annie twisted up the note, directed it to Mrs. Willis, and left it on her dressing-table.

Then, with a wonderful amount of forethought for

her, she emptied the contents of a little purse into a tiny gingham bag, which she fastened inside the front of her dress. She put on her shady hat, and threw a shawl across her arm, and then, slipping softly downstairs, she went out through the deserted kitchens, down the back avenue, and past the laurel bush, until she came to the stile which led into the wood—she was going straight to the gipsies' encampment.

Annie, with some of the gipsy's characteristics in her own blood, had always taken an extraordinary interest in these queer wandering people. Gipsies had a fascination for her, she loved stories about them; if a gipsy encampment was near, she always begged the teachers to walk in that direction. Annie had a very vivid imagination, and in the days when she reigned as favourite in the school she used to make up stories for the express benefit of her companions. These stories, as a rule, always turned upon the gipsies. Many and many a time had the girls of Lavender House almost gasped with horror as Annie described the queer ways of these people. For her, personally, their wildness and their freedom had a certain fascination, and she was heard in her gayest moments to remark that she would rather like to be stolen and adopted by a gipsy tribe.

Whenever Annie had an opportunity, she chatted with the gipsy wives, and allowed them to tell her fortune, and listened eagerly to their narratives. When a little child she had once for several months been under the care of a nurse who was a reclaimed gipsy, and this girl had given her all kinds of information about them. Annie often felt that she quite loved these wild people, and Mother Rachel was the first gipsy she cordially shrank from and disliked.

When the little girl started now on her wild-goose chase after Nan, she was by no means devoid of a plan of action. The knowledge she had taken so many years to acquire came to her aid, and she determined to use it for Nan's benefit. She knew that the gipsies, with all their wandering and erratic habits, had a certain attachment, if not for homes, at least for sites; she knew that as a rule they encamped over and over again in the same place; she knew that their wanderings were conducted with method, and their apparently lawless lives governed by strict self-made rules.

Annie made straight now for the encampment, which stood in a little dell at the other side of the fairies' field. Here for weeks past the gipsies' tents had been seen; here the gipsy children had played, and the men and women smoked and lain about in the sun.

Annie entered the small field now, but uttered no exclamation of surprise when she found that all the tents, with the exception of one, had been removed, and that this tent also was being rapidly taken down by a man and a girl, while a tall boy stood by, holding a donkey by the bridle.

Annie wasted no time in looking for Nan here. Before the girl and the man could see her, she darted behind a bush, and removing her little bag of money, hid it carefully under some long grass; then she pulled a very bright yellow sash out of her pocket, tied it round her blue cotton dress, and leaving her little shawl also on the ground, tripped gaily up to the tent.

She saw with pleasure that the girl who was helping the man was about her own size. She went up and touched her on the shoulder.

"THE GIRL . . . . RETURNED TO SHEAR POOR ANNIE'S BEAUTIFUL HAIR" (*p.* 239).

"Look here," she said, "I want to make such a pretty play by-and-by—I want to play that I'm a gipsy girl. Will you give me your clothes, if I give you mine? See, mine are neat, and this sash is very handsome. Will you have them? Do. I am so anxious to play at being a gipsy."

The girl turned and stared. Annie's pretty blue print and gay sash were certainly tempting bait. She glanced at her father.

"The little lady wants to change," she said in an eager voice.

The man nodded acquiescence, and the girl taking Annie's hand, ran quickly with her to the bottom of the field.

"You don't mean it, surely?" she said. "Eh, but I'm uncommon willing."

"Yes, I certainly mean it," said Annie. "You are a dear, good, obliging girl, and how nice you will look in my pretty blue cotton! I like that striped petticoat of yours, too, and that gay handkerchief you wear round your shoulders. Thank you so very much. Now, do I look like a real, real gipsy?"

"Your hair ain't ragged enough, miss."

"Oh, clip it, then; clip it away. I want to be quite the real thing. Have you got a pair of scissors?"

The girl ran back to the tent, and presently returned to shear poor Annie's beautiful hair in truly rough fashion.

"Now, miss, you look much more like, only your arms are a bit too white. Stay, we has got some walnut-juice; we was just a-using of it. I'll touch you up fine, miss."

So she did, darkening Annie's brown skin to a real gipsy tone.

"You're a dear, good girl," said Annie, in conclusion; and as the girl's father called her roughly at this moment, she was obliged to go away, looking ungainly enough in the English child's neat clothes.

CHAPTER XLI.

DISGUISED.

ANNIE ran out of the field, mounted the stile which led into the wood, and stood there until the gipsy man and girl, and the boy with the donkey, had finally disappeared. Then she left her hiding-place, and taking her little gingham bag out of the long grass, secured it once more in the front of her dress. She felt queer and uncomfortable in her new dress, and the gipsy girl's heavy shoes tired her feet; but she was not to be turned from her purpose by any manner of discomforts, and she started bravely on her long trudge over the dusty roads, for her object was to follow the gipsies to their next encampment, about ten miles away. She had managed, with some tact, to obtain a certain amount of information from the delighted gipsey girl. The girl told Annie that she was very glad they were going from here; that this was a very dull place, and that they would not have stayed so long but for Mother Rachel, who, for some reasons of her own, had refused to stir.

Here the girl drew herself up short, and coloured under her dark skin. But Annie's tact never failed. She even yawned a little, and seemed scarcely to hear the girl's words.

Now, in the distance, she followed these people.

In her disguise, uncomfortable as it was, she felt tolerably safe. Should any of the people in Lavender House happen to pass her on the way, they would never recognise Annie Forest in this small gipsy maiden. When she did approach the gipsies' dwelling she might have some hope of passing as one of themselves. The only one whom she had really to fear was the girl with whom she had changed clothes, and she trusted to her wits to keep out of this young person's way.

When Zillah, her old gipsy nurse, had charmed her long ago with gipsy legends and stories, Annie had always begged to hear about the fair English children whom the gipsies stole, and Zillah had let her into some secrets which partly accounted for the fact that so few of these children are ever recovered.

She walked very fast now; her depression was gone, a great excitement, a great longing, a great hope, keeping her up. She forgot that she had eaten nothing since breakfast; she forgot everything in all the world now but her great love for little Nan, and her desire to lay down her very life, if necessary, to rescue Nan from the terrible fate which awaited her if she was brought up as a gipsy's child.

Annie, however, was unaccustomed to such long walks, and besides, recent events had weakened her, and by the time she reached Sefton—for her road lay straight through this little town—she was so hot and thirsty that she looked around her anxiously to find some place of refreshment.

In an unconscious manner she paused before a restaurant, where she and several other girls of Laven-

der House had more than once been regaled with buns and milk.

The remembrance of the fresh milk and the nice buns came gratefully before the memory of the tired child now. Forgetting her queer attire, she went into the shop, and walked boldly up to the counter.

Annie's disguise, however, was good, and the young woman who was serving, instead of bending forward with the usual gracious "What can I get for you, miss?" said very sharply—

"Go away at once, little girl; we don't allow beggars here; leave the shop instantly. No, I have nothing for you."

Annie was about to reply rather hotly, for she had an idea that even a gipsy's money might purchase buns and milk, when she was suddenly startled, and almost terrified into betraying herself, by encountering the gentle and fixed stare of Miss Jane Bruce, who had been leaning over the counter and talking to one of the shop-women when Annie entered.

"Here is a penny for you, little girl," she said. "You can get a nice hunch of stale bread for a penny in the shop at the corner of the High Street."

Annie's eyes flashed back at the little lady, her lips quivered, and, clasping the penny, she rushed out of the shop.

"My dear," said Miss Jane, turning to her sister, "did you notice the extraordinary likeness that little gipsy girl bore to Annie Forest?"

Miss Agnes sighed. "Not particularly, love," she answered; "but I scarcely looked at her. I wonder if our dear little Annie is any happier than she was. Ah, I think we have done here. Good afternoon, Mrs. Tremlett."

The little old ladies trotted off, giving no more thoughts to the gipsy child.

Poor Annie almost ran down the street, and never paused till she reached a shop of much humbler appearance, where she was served with some cold slices of German sausage, some indifferent bread and butter, and milk by no means over-good. The coarse fare, and the rough people who surrounded her, made the poor child feel both sick and frightened. She found she could only keep up her character by remaining almost silent, for the moment she opened her lips people turned round and stared at her.

She paid for her meal, however, and presently found herself at the other side of Sefton, and in a part of the country which was comparatively strange to her. The gipsies' present encampment was about a mile away from the town of Oakley, a much larger place than Sefton. Sefton and Oakley lay about six miles apart. Annie trudged bravely on, her head aching; for, of course, as a gipsy girl, she could use no parasol to shade her from the sun. At last the comparative cool of the evening arrived, and the little girl gave a sigh of relief, and looked forward to her bed and supper at Oakley. She had made up her mind to sleep there, and to go to the gipsies' encampment very early in the morning. It was quite dark by the time she reached Oakley, and she was now so tired, and her feet so blistered from walking in the gipsy girl's rough shoes, that she could scarcely proceed another step. The noise and the size of Oakley, too, bewildered and frightened her. She had learnt a lesson in Sefton, and dared not venture into the more respectable streets. How could she sleep in those hot, common, close houses? Surely it would be

better for her to lie down under a cool hedge-row—there could be no real cold on this lovely summer's night, and the hours would quickly pass, and the time soon arrive when she must go boldly in search of Nan. She resolved to sleep in a hayfield which took her fancy just outside the town, and she only went into Oakley for the purpose of buying some bread and milk.

Annie was so far fortunate as to get a refreshing draught of really good milk from a woman who stood by a cottage door, and who gave her a piece of girdle-cake to eat with it.

"You're one of the gipsies, my dear?" said the woman. "I saw them passing in their caravans an hour back. No doubt you are for taking up your old quarters in the copse, just alongside of Squire Thompson's long acre field. How is it you are not with the rest of them, child?"

"I was late in starting," said Annie. "Can you tell me the best way to get from here to the long acre field?"

"Oh! you take that turn-stile, child, and keep in the narrow path by the cornfields; it's two miles and a half from here as the crow flies. No, no, my dear, I don't want your pennies; but you might humour my little girl here by telling her fortune—she's wonderful taken by the gipsy folk."

Annie coloured painfully. The child came forward, and she crossed her hand with a piece of silver. She looked at the little palm and muttered something about being rich and fortunate, and marrying a prince in disguise, and having no trouble whatever.

"Eh! but that's a fine lot, is yours, Peggy," said the gratified mother.

Peggy however, aged nine, had a wiser head on her young shoulders.

"She didn't tell no proper fortune," she said disparagingly, when Annie left the cottage. "She didn't speak about no crosses, and no biting disappointments, and no bleeding wounds. I don't believe in her, I don't. I like fortunes mixed, not all one way; them fortunes ain't natural, and I don't believe she's no proper gipsy girl."

CHAPTER XLII.

HESTER.

AT Lavender House the confusion, the terror, and the dismay were great. For several hours the girls seemed quite to lose their heads, and just when, under Mrs. Willis's and the other teachers' calmness and determination, they were being restored to discipline and order, the excitement and alarm broke out afresh when some one brought Annie's little note to Mrs. Willis, and the school discovered that she also was missing.

On this occasion no one did doubt her motive; disobedient as her act was, no one wasted words of blame on her. All, from the head-mistress to the smallest child in the school, knew that it was love for little Nan that had taken Annie off; and the tears started to Mrs. Willis's eyes when she first read the tiny note, and then placed it tenderly in her desk. Hester's face became almost ashen in its hue when she heard what Annie had done.

"Annie has gone herself to bring back Nan to

you, Hester," said Phyllis. "It was I told her, and I know now by her face that she must have made up her mind at once."

"Very disobedient of her to go," said Dora Russell; but no one took up Dora's tone, and Mary Price said, after a pause—

"Disobedient or not, it was brave—it was really very plucky."

"It is my opinion," said Nora, "that if any one in the world can find little Nan it will be Annie. You remember, Phyllis, how often she has talked to us about gipsies, and what a lot she knows about them?"

"Oh, yes; she'll be better than fifty policemen," echoed several girls; and then two or three young faces were turned towards Hester, and some voice said almost scornfully—

"You'll have to love Annie now; you'll have to admit that there is something good in our Annie when she brings your little Nan home again."

Hester's lip quivered; she tried to speak, but a sudden burst of tears came from her instead. She walked slowly out of the astonished little group, who none of them believed that proud Hester Thornton could weep.

The wretched girl rushed up to her room, where she threw herself on her bed and gave way to some of the bitterest tears she had ever shed. All her indifference to Annie, all her real unkindness, all her ever-increasing dislike came back now to torture and harass her. She began to believe with the girls that Annie would be successful; she began dimly to acknowledge in her heart the strange power which this child possessed; she guessed that

Annie would heap coals of fire on her head by bringing back her little sister. She hoped, she longed, she could almost have found it in her heart to pray that some one else, not Annie, might save little Nan.

For not yet had Hester made up her mind to confess the truth about Annie Forest. To confess the truth now meant humiliation in the eyes of the whole school. Even for Nan's sake she could not, she would not, be great enough for this.

Sobbing on her bed, trembling from head to foot, in an agony of almost uncontrollable grief, she could not bring her proud and stubborn little heart to accept God's only way of peace. No, she hoped she might be able to influence Susan Drummond and induce her to confess, and if Annie was not cleared in that way, if she really saved little Nan, she would doubtless be restored to much of her lost favour in the school.

Hester had never been a favourite at Lavender House; but now her great trouble caused all the girls to speak to her kindly and considerately, and as she lay on her bed she presently heard a gentle step on the floor of her room—a cool little hand was laid tenderly on her forehead, and opening her swollen eyes, she met Cecil's loving gaze.

"There is no news yet, Hester," said Cecil; "but Mrs. Willis has just gone herself into Sefton, and will not lose an hour in getting further help. Mrs. Willis looks quite haggard. Of course she is very anxious both about Annie and Nan."

"Oh, Annie is safe enough," murmured Hester, burying her head in the bedclothes.

"I don't know; Annie is very impulsive, and

very pretty ; the gipsies may like to steal her too—of course she has gone straight to one of their encampments. Naturally Mrs. Willis is most anxious."

Hester pressed her hand to her throbbing head.

"We are all so sorry for you, dear," said Cecil gently.

"Thank you—being sorry for one does not do a great deal of good, does it?"

"I thought sympathy always did good," replied Cecil, looking puzzled.

"Thank you," said Hester again. She lay quite still for several minutes with her eyes closed. Her face looked intensely unhappy. Cecil was not easily repelled, and she guessed only too surely that Hester's proud heart was suffering much. She was puzzled, however, how to approach her, and had almost made up her mind to go away and beg of kind-hearted Miss Danesbury to see if she could come and do something, when through the open window there came the shrill sweet laughter and the eager, high-pitched tones of some of the youngest children in the school. A strange quiver passed over Hester's face at the sound ; she sat up in bed, and gasped out in a half-strangled voice—

"Oh! I can't bear it—little Nan, little Nan! Cecil, I am very, very unhappy."

"I know it, darling," said Cecil, and she put her arms round the excited girl. "Oh, Hester! don't turn away from me ; do let us be unhappy together."

"But you did not care for Nan."

"I did—we all loved the pretty darling."

"Suppose I never see her again?" said Hester half wildly. "Oh, Cecil! and mother left her to me! mother gave her to me to take care of, and to bring

to her some day in heaven. Oh, little Nan, my pretty, my love, my sweet! I think I could better bear her being dead than this."

"You could, Hester," said Cecil, "if she was never to be found; but I don't think God will give you such a terrible punishment. I think little Nan will be restored to you. Let us ask God to do it, Hetty—let us kneel down now, we two little girls, and pray to Him with all our might."

"I can't pray; don't ask me," said Hester, turning her face away.

"Then I will."

"But not here, Cecil. Cecil, I am not good—I am not good enough to pray."

"We don't want to be good to pray," said Cecil. "We want perhaps to be unhappy—perhaps sorry; but if God waited just for goodness, I don't think He would get many prayers."

"Well, I am unhappy, but not sorry. No, no; don't ask me, I cannot pray."

CHAPTER XLIII.

SUSAN.

Mrs. Willis came back at a very late hour from Sefton. The police were confident that they must soon discover both children, but no tidings had yet been heard of either of them. Mrs. Willis ordered her girls to bed, and went herself to kiss Hester and give her a special "good-night." She was struck by the peculiarly unhappy, and even hardened, expres-

sion on the poor child's face, and felt that she did not half understand her.

In the middle of the night Hester awoke from a troubled dream. She awoke with a sharp cry, so sharp and intense in its sound that had any girl been awake in the next room she must have heard it. She felt that she could no longer remain close to that little empty cot. She suddenly remembered that Susan Drummond would be alone to-night: what time so good as the present for having a long talk with Susan and getting her to clear Annie? She slipped out of bed, put on her dressing-gown, and softly opening the door, ran down the passage to Susan's room.

Susan was in bed, and fast asleep. Hester could see her face quite plainly in the moonlight, for Susan slept facing the window, and the blind was not drawn down.

Hester had some difficulty in awakening Miss Drummond, who, however, at last sat up in bed, yawning prodigiously.

"What is the matter? Is that you, Hester Thornton? Have you got any news of little Nan? Has Annie come back?"

"No, they are both still away. Susy, I want to speak to you."

"Dear me! what for? must you speak in the middle of the night?"

"Yes, for I don't want any one else to know. Oh, Susan, please don't go to sleep."

"My dear, I won't, if I can help it. Do you mind throwing a little cold water over my face and head? There is a can by the bed-side. I always keep one handy. Ah, thanks—now I am wide awake. I shall

probably remain so for about two minutes. Can you get your say over in that time?"

"I wonder, Susan," said Hester, "if you have got any heart—but heart or not, I have just come here to-night to tell you that I have found you out. You are at the bottom of all this mischief about Annie Forest."

Susan had a most phlegmatic face, an utterly unemotional voice, and she now stared calmly at Hester and demanded to know what in the world she meant.

Hester felt her temper going, her self-control deserting her. Susan's apparent innocence and indifference drove her half frantic.

"Oh, you are mean," she said. "You pretend to be innocent, but you are the deepest and wickedest girl in the school. I tell you, Susan, I have found you out—you put that caricature of Mrs. Willis into Cecil's book; you changed Dora's theme. I don't know why you did it, nor how you did it, but you are the guilty person, and you have allowed the sin of it to remain on Annie's shoulders all this time. Oh, you are the very meanest girl I ever heard of!"

"Dear, dear!" said Susan, "I wish I had not asked you to throw cold water over my head and face, and allow myself to be made very wet and uncomfortable, just to be told I am the meanest girl you ever met. And pray what affair is this of yours? You certainly don't love Annie Forest."

"I don't, but I want justice to be done to her. Annie is very, very unhappy. Oh, Susy, won't you go and tell Mrs. Willis the truth?"

"Really, my dear Hester, I think you are a little mad. How long have you known all this about me, pray?"

"Oh, for some time; since—since the night the essay was changed."

"Ah, then, if what you state is true, you told Mrs. Willis a lie, for she distinctly asked you if you knew anything about the 'Muddy Stream,' and you said you didn't. I saw you—I remarked how very red you got when you plumped out that great lie! My dear, if I am the meanest and wickedest girl in the school, prove it—go, tell Mrs. Willis what you know. Now, if you will allow me, I will get back into the land of dreams."

Susan curled herself up once more in her bed, wrapped the bed-clothes tightly round her, and was to all appearance oblivious of Hester's presence

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CHAPTER XLIV.

UNDER THE HEDGE.

IT is one thing to talk of the delights of sleeping under a hedgerow and another to realise them. A hayfield is a very charming place, but in the middle of the night, with the dew clinging to everything, it is apt to prove but a chilly bed; the most familiar objects put on strange and unreal forms, the most familiar sounds become loud and alarming. Annie slept for about an hour soundly; then she awoke, trembling with cold in every limb, startled and almost terrified by the oppressive loneliness of the night, sure that the insect life which surrounded her, and which would keep up successions of chirps, and croaks, and buzzes, was something mysterious and terrifying. Annie was a brave child, but even brave

little girls may be allowed to possess nerves under her present conditions, and when a spider ran across her face she started up with a scream of terror. At this moment she almost regretted the close and dirty lodgings which she might have obtained for a few pence at Oakley. The hay in the field which she had selected was partly cut and partly standing. The cut portion had been piled up into little cocks and hillocks, and these, with the night shadows round them, appeared to the frightened child to assume large and half-human proportions. She found she could not sleep any longer. She wrapped her shawl tightly round her, and, crouching into the hedgerow, waited for the dawn.

That watched-for dawn seemed to the tired child as if it would never come; but at last her solitary vigil came to an end, the cold grew greater, a little gentle breeze stirred the uncut grass, and up in the sky overhead the stars became fainter and the atmosphere clearer. Then came a little faint flush of pink, then a brighter light, and then all in a moment the birds burst into a perfect jubilee of song, the insects talked and chirped and buzzed in new tones, the hay-cocks became simply hay-cocks, the dew sparkled on the wet grass, the sun had risen, and the new day had begun.

Annie sat up and rubbed her tired eyes. With the sunshine and brightness her versatile spirits revived; she buckled on her courage like an armour, and almost laughed at the miseries of the past few hours. Once more she believed that success and victory would be hers, once more in her small way she was ready to do or die. She believed absolutely in the holiness of her mission. Love—love alone

simple and pure, was guiding her. She gave no thought to after-consequences, she gave no memory to past events: her object now was to rescue Nan, and she herself was nothing.

Annie had a fellow-feeling, a rare sympathy with every little child; but no child had ever come to take Nan's place with her. The child she had first begun to notice simply out of a naughty spirit of revenge, had twined herself round her heart, and Annie loved Nan all the more dearly because she had long ago repented of stealing her affections from Hester, and would gladly have restored her to her old place next to Hetty's heart. Her love for Nan, therefore, had the purity and greatness which all love that calls forth self-sacrifice must possess. Annie had denied herself, and kept away from Nan of late. Now, indeed, she was going to rescue her; but if she thought of herself at all, it was with the certainty that for this present act of disobedience Mrs. Willis would dismiss her from the school, and she would not see little Nan again.

Never mind that, if Nan herself was saved. Annie was disobedient, but on this occasion she was not unhappy; she had none of that remorse which troubled her so much after her wild picnic in the fairies' field. On the contrary, she had a strange sense of peace and even guidance; she had confessed this sin to Mrs. Willis, and, though she was suspected of far worse, her own innocence kept her heart untroubled. The verse which had occurred to her two mornings before still rang in her ears—

"A soul which has sinned and is pardoned again."

The impulsive, eager child was possessed just now

of something which men call True Courage; it was founded on the knowledge that God would help her, and was accordingly calm and strengthening.

Annie rose from her damp bed, and looked around her for a little stream where she might wash her face and hands; suddenly she remembered that face and hands were dyed, and that she would do best to leave them alone. She smoothed out as best she could the ragged elf-locks which the gipsy maid had left on her curly head, and then, covering her face with her hands, said simply and earnestly—

"Please, my Father in heaven, help me to find little Nan;" then she set off through the cornfields in the direction of the gipsies' encampment.

CHAPTER XLV.

TIGER.

It was still very, very early in the morning, and the gipsy-folk, tired from their march on the preceding day, slept. There stood the conical, queer-shaped tents, four in number; at a little distance off grazed the donkeys and a couple of rough mules; at the door of the tents lay stretched out in profound repose two or three dogs.

Annie dreaded the barking of the dogs, although she guessed that if they set up a noise, and a gipsy wife or man put out their heads in consequence, they would only desire the gipsy child to lie down and keep quiet.

She stood still for a moment—she was very anxious to prowl around the place and examine the

ground while the gipsies still slept, but the watchful dogs deterred her. She stood perfectly quiet behind the hedge-row, thinking hard. Should she trust to a charm she knew she possessed, and venture into the encampment? Annie had almost as great a fascination over dogs and cats as she had over children. As a little child going to visit with her mother at strange houses, the watch-dogs never barked at her; on the contrary, they yielded to the charm which seemed to come from her little fingers as she patted their great heads. Slowly their tails would move backwards and forwards as she petted them, and even the most ferocious would look at her with affection.

Annie wondered if the gipsy dogs would now allow her to approach without barking. She felt that the chances were in her favour; she was dressed in gipsy garments, there would be nothing strange in her appearance, and if she could get near one of the dogs she knew that she could exercise the magic of her touch.

Her object, then, was to approach one of the tents very, very quietly—so softly that even the dog's ears should not detect the light footfall. If she could approach close enough to put her hand on the dog's neck all would be well. She pulled off the gipsy maid's rough shoes, hid them in the grass where she could find them again, and came gingerly, step by step, nearer and nearer the principal tent. At its entrance lay a ferocious-looking half-bred bull-dog. Annie possessed that necessary accompaniment to courage—great outward calm; the greater the danger, the more cool and self-possessed did she become. She was within a step or two of the tent when she

trod accidentally on a small twig; it cracked, giving her foot a sharp pain, and, very slight as the sound was, causing the bull-dog to awake. He raised his wicked face, saw the figure like his own people, and yet unlike, but a step or two away, and, uttering a low growl, sprang forward.

In the ordinary course of things this growl would have risen in volume and would have terminated in a volley of barking; but Annie was prepared: she went down on her knees, held out her arms, said, "Poor fellow!" in her own seductive voice, and the bull-dog fawned at her feet. He licked one of her hands while she patted him gently with the other.

"Come, poor fellow," she said then in a gentle tone, and Annie and the dog began to perambulate round the tents.

The other dogs raised sleepy eyes, but seeing Tiger and the girl together, took no notice whatever, except by a thwack or two of their stumpy tails. Annie was now looking not only at the tents, but for something else which Zillah, her nurse, had told her might be found near to many gipsy encampments. This was a small subterranean passage, which generally led into a long-disused underground Danish fort. Zillah had told her what uses the gipsies liked to make of these underground passages, and how they often chose those which had two entrances. She told her that in this way they eluded the police, and were enabled successfully to hide the goods which they stole. She had also described to her their great ingenuity in hiding the entrances to these underground retreats.

Annie's idea now was that little Nan was hidden in one of these vaults, and she determined first to

make sure of its existence, and then to venture herself into this underground region in search of the lost child.

She had made a decided conquest in the person of Tiger, who followed her round and round the tents, and when the gipsies at last began to stir, and Annie crept into the hedge-row, the dog crouched by her side. Tiger was the favourite dog of the camp, and presently one of the men called to him; he rose unwillingly, looked back with longing eyes at Annie, and trotted off, to return in the space of about five minutes with a great hunch of broken bread in his mouth. This was his breakfast, and he meant to share it with his new friend. Annie was too hungry to be fastidious, and she also knew the necessity of keeping up her strength. She crept still farther under the hedge, and the dog and girl shared the broken bread between them.

Presently the tents were all astir; the gipsy children began to swarm about, the women lit fires in the open air, and the smell of very appetising breakfasts filled the atmosphere. The men also lounged into view, standing lazily at the doors of their tents, and smoking great pipes of tobacco. Annie lay quiet. She could see from her hiding-place without being seen. Suddenly—and her eyes began to dilate, and she found her heart beating strangely—she laid her hand on Tiger, who was quivering all over.

"Stay with me, dear dog," she said.

There was a great commotion and excitement in the gipsy camp; the children screamed and ran into the tents, the women paused in their preparation for breakfast, the men took their short pipes out of their mouths; every dog, with the exception of Tiger,

barked ferociously. Tiger and Annie alone were motionless.

The cause of all this uproar was a body of police, about six in number, who came boldly into the field, and demanded instantly to search the tents.

"We want a woman who calls herself Mother Rachel," they said. "She belongs to this encampment. We know her; let her come forward at once; we wish to question her."

The men stood about; the women came near; the children crept out of their tents, placing their fingers to their frightened lips, and staring at the men who represented those horrors to their unsophisticated minds called Law and Order.

"We must search the tents. We won't stir from the spot until we have had an interview with Mother Rachel," said the principal member of the police force.

The men answered respectfully that the gipsy mother was not yet up; but if the gentlemen would wait a moment she would soon come and speak to them.

The officers expressed their willingness to wait, and collected round the tents.

Just at this instant, under the hedge-row, Tiger raised his head. Annie's watchful eyes accompanied the dog's. He was gazing after a tiny gipsy maid who was skulking along the hedge, and who presently disappeared through a very small opening into the neighbouring field.

Quick as thought Annie, holding Tiger's collar, darted after her. The little maid heard the footsteps; but seeing another gipsy girl, and their own dog, Tiger, she took no further notice, but ran openly

and very swiftly across the field until she came to a broken wall. Here she tugged and tugged at some loose stones, managed to push one away, and then called down into the ground—

"Mother Rachel!"

"Come, Tiger," said Annie. She flew to a hedge not far off, and once more the dog and she hid themselves. The small girl was too excited to notice either their coming or going; she went on calling anxiously into the ground—

"Mother Rachel! Mother Rachel!"

Presently a black head and a pair of brawny shoulders appeared, and the tall woman whose face and figure Annie knew so well stepped up out of the ground, pushed back the stones into their place, and, taking the gipsy child into her arms, ran swiftly across the field in the direction of the tents.

CHAPTER XLVI.

FOR LOVE OF NAN.

NOW was Annie's time. "Tiger," she said, for she had heard the men calling the dog's name, "I want to go right down into that hole in the ground, and you are to come with me. Don't let us lose a moment, good dog."

The dog wagged his tail, capered about in front of Annie, and then with a wonderful shrewdness ran before her to the broken wall, where he stood with his head bent downwards and his eyes fixed on the ground.

Annie pulled and tugged at the loose stones;

they were so heavy and so cunningly arranged that she wondered how the little maid, who was smaller than herself, had managed to remove them. She saw quickly, however, that they were arranged with a certain leverage, and that the largest stone, that which formed the real entrance to the underground passage, was balanced in its place in such a fashion that when she leant on a certain portion of it, it moved aside, and allowed plenty of room for her to go down into the earth.

Very dark and dismal and uninviting did the rude steps, which led nobody knew where, appear. For one moment Annie hesitated; but the thought of Nan hidden somewhere in this awful wretchedness nerved her courage.

"Go first, Tiger, please," she said, and the dog scampered down, sniffing the earth as he went. Annie followed him, but she had scarcely got her head below the level of the ground before she found herself in total and absolute darkness; she had unwittingly touched the heavy stone, which had swung back into its place. She heard Tiger sniffing below, and, calling to him to keep by her side, she went very carefully down and down and down, until at last she knew by the increase of air that she must have come to the end of the narrow entrance passage.

She was now able to stand upright, and raising her hand, she tried in vain to find a roof. The room where she stood, then, must be lofty. She went forward in the utter darkness very, very slowly; suddenly her head again came in contact with the roof; she made a few steps farther on, and then found that to proceed at all she must go on her hands

and knees. She bent down and peered through the darkness.

"We'll go on, Tiger," she said, and, holding the dog's collar and clinging to him for protection, she crept along the narrow passage.

Suddenly she gave an exclamation of joy—at the other end of this gloomy passage was light—faint twilight surely, but still undoubted light, which came down from some chink in the outer world. Annie came to the end of the passage, and, standing upright, found herself suddenly in a room; a very small and miserable room, certainly, but with the twilight shining through it, which revealed not only that it was a room, but a room which contained a heap of straw, a three-legged stool, and two or three cracked cups and saucers. Here, then, was Mother Rachel's lair, and here she must look for Nan.

The darkness had been so intense that even the faint twilight of this little chamber had dazzled Annie's eyes for a moment; the next, however, her vision became clear. She saw that the straw bed contained a bundle; she went near—out of the wrapped-up bundle of shawls appeared the head of a child. The child slept, and moaned in its slumbers.

Annie bent over it and said, "Thank God!" in a tone of rapture, and then, stooping down, she passionately kissed the lips of little Nan.

Nan's skin had been dyed with the walnut-juice, her pretty, soft hair had been cut short, her dainty clothes had been changed for the most ragged gipsy garments, but still she was undoubtedly Nan, the child whom Annie had come to save.

From her uneasy slumbers the poor little one awoke with a cry of terror. She could not recognise

Annie's changed face, and clasped her hands before her eyes, and said piteously—

"Me want to go home—go 'way, naughty woman, me want my Annie."

"Little darling!" said Annie, in her sweetest tones. The changed face had not appealed to Nan, but the old voice went straight to her baby heart; she stopped crying and looked anxiously towards the entrance of the room.

"Tum in, Annie—me here, Annie—little Nan want 'oo."

Annie glanced around her in despair. Suddenly her quick eyes lighted on a jug of water; she flew to it, and washed and laved her face.

"Coming, darling," she said, as she tried to remove the hateful dye. She succeeded partly, and when she came back, to her great joy, the child recognised her.

"Now, little precious, we will get out of this as fast as we can," said Annie, and, clasping Nan tightly in her arms, she prepared to return by the way she had come. Then and there, for the first time, there flashed across her memory the horrible fact that the stone door had swung back into its place, and that by no possible means could she open it. She and Nan and Tiger were buried in a living tomb, and must either stay there and perish, or await the tender mercies of the cruel Mother Rachel.

Nan, with her arms tightly clasped round Annie's neck, began to cry fretfully. She was impatient to get out of this dismal place; she was no longer oppressed by fears, for with the Annie whom she loved she felt absolutely safe; but she was hungry and cold and uncomfortable, and it seemed but a

step, to little inexperienced Nan, from Annie's arms to her snug, cheerful nursery at Lavender House.

"Tum, Annie—tum home, Annie," she begged, and, when Annie did not stir, she began to weep.

In truth, the poor, brave little girl was sadly puzzled, and her first gleam of returning hope lay in the remembrance of Zillah's words, that there were generally two entrances to these old underground forts. Tiger, who seemed thoroughly at home in this little room, and had curled himself up comfortably on the heap of straw, had probably often been here before. Perhaps Tiger knew the way to the second entrance. Annie called him to her side.

"Tiger," she said, going down on her knees, and looking full into his ugly but intelligent face, "Nan and I want to go out of this."

Tiger wagged his stumpy tail.

"We are hungry, Tiger, and we want something to eat, and you'd like a bone, wouldn't you?"

Tiger's tail went with ferocious speed, and he licked Annie's hand.

"There's no use going back that way, dear dog," continued the girl, pointing with her arm in the direction they had come. "The door is fastened, Tiger, and we can't get out. We can't get out because the door is shut."

The dog's tail had ceased to wag; he took in the situation, for his whole expression showed dejection, and he drooped his head.

It was now quite evident to Annie that Tiger had been here before, and that on some other occasion in his life he had wanted to get out and could not because the door was shut.

"Now, Tiger," said Annie, speaking cheerfully,

and rising to her feet, "we must get out. Nan and I are hungry, and you want your bone. Take us out the other way, good Tiger—the other way, dear dog."

She moved instantly towards the little passage; the dog followed her.

"The other way," she said, and she turned her back on the long narrow passage, and took a step or two into complete darkness. The dog began to whine, caught hold of her dress, and tried to pull her back.

"Quite right, Tiger, we won't go that way," said Annie instantly. She returned into the dimly-lighted room.

"Find a way—find a way out, Tiger," she said.

The dog evidently understood her; he moved restlessly about the room. Finally he got up on the bed, pulled and scratched and tore away the straw at the upper end, then, wagging his tail, flew to Annie's side. She came back with him. Beneath the straw was a tiny, tiny trap-door.

"Oh, Tiger!" said the girl; she went down on her knees, and, finding she could not stir it, wondered if this also was kept in its place by a system of balancing. She was right; after a very little pressing the door moved aside, and Annie saw four or five rudely carved steps.

"Come, Nan," she said joyfully, "Tiger has saved us; these steps must lead us out."

The dog, with a joyful whine, went down first, and Annie, clasping Nan tightly in her arms, followed him. Four, five, six steps they went down; then, to Annie's great joy, she found that the next step began

to ascend. Up and up she went, cheered by a welcome shaft of light. Finally she, Nan, and the dog found themselves emerging into the open air, through a hole which might have been taken for a large rabbit burrow.

CHAPTER XLVII.

RESCUED.

THE girl, the child, and the dog found themselves in a comparatively strange country—Annie had completely lost her bearings. She looked around her for some sign of the gipsies' encampment; but whether she had really gone a greater distance than she imagined in those underground vaults, or whether the tents were hidden in some hollow of the ground, she did not know; she was only conscious that she was in a strange country, that Nan was clinging to her and crying for her breakfast, and that Tiger was sniffing the air anxiously. Annie guessed that Tiger could take them back to the camp, but this was by no means her wish. When she emerged out of the underground passage she was conscious for the first time of a strange and unknown experience. Absolute terror seized the brave child; she trembled from head to foot, her head ached violently, and the ground on which she stood seemed to reel, and the sky to turn round. She sat down for a moment on the green grass. What ailed her? where was she? how could she get home? Nan's little piteous wail, "Me want my bekfas', me want my nursie, me want Hetty," almost irritated her.

"Oh, Nan," she said at last piteously, "have you not got your own Annie? Oh, Nan, dear little Nan, Annie feels so ill!"

Nan had the biggest and softest of baby hearts —breakfast, nurse, Hetty, were all forgotten in the crowning desire to comfort Annie. She climbed on her knee and stroked her face and kissed her lips.

"'Oo better now?" she said in a tone of baby inquiry.

Annie roused herself with a great effort.

"Yes, darling," she said; "we will try and get home. Come, Tiger. Tiger, dear, I don't want to go back to the gipsies; take me the other way—take me to Oakley."

Tiger again sniffed the air, looked anxiously at Annie, and trotted on in front. Little Nan in her ragged gipsy clothes walked sedately by Annie's side.

"Where 'oo s'oes?" she said, pointing to the girl's bare feet.

"Gone, Nan—gone. Never mind, I've got you. My little treasure, my little love, you're safe at last."

As Annie tottered, rather than walked, down a narrow path which led directly through a field of standing corn, she was startled by the sudden apparition of a bright-eyed girl, who appeared so suddenly in her path that she might have been supposed to have risen out of the very ground.

The girl stared hard at Annie, fixed her eyes inquiringly on Nan and Tiger, and then, turning on her heel, dashed up the path, went through a turn-stile, across the road, and into a cottage.

"Mother," she exclaimed, "I said she warn't a

real gipsy; she's a-coming back, and her face is all streaked like, and she has a little 'un along with her, and a dawg, and the only one as is gipsy is the dawg. Come and look at her, mother; oh, she is a fine take-in!"

The round-faced, good-humoured looking mother, whose name was Mrs. Williams, had been washing and putting away the breakfast things when her daughter entered. She now wiped her hands hastily and came to the cottage door.

"Cross the road, and come to the stile, mother," said the energetic Peggy—"oh, there she be a-creeping along—oh, ain't she a take-in?"

"'Sakes alive!" ejaculated Mrs. Williams, "the girl is ill! why, she can't keep herself steady! There! I knew she'd fall; ah! poor little thing—poor little thing."

It did not take Mrs. Williams an instant to reach Annie's side; and in another moment she had lifted her in her strong arms and carried her into the cottage, Peggy lifting Nan and following in the rear, while Tiger walked by their sides.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

DARK DAYS.

A WHOLE week had passed, and there were no tidings whatever of little Nan or of Annie Forest. No one at Lavender House had heard a word about them; the police came and went, detectives even arrived from London, but there were no traces whatever of the missing children.

The Midsummer holiday was now close at hand, but no one spoke of it or thought of it. Mrs. Willis told the teachers that the prizes should be distributed, but she said she could invite no guests and could allow of no special festivities. Miss Danesbury and Miss Good repeated her words to the school-girls, who answered without hesitation that they did not wish for feasting and merriment; they would rather the day passed unnoticed. In truth, the fact that their baby was gone, that their favourite and prettiest and brightest schoolmate had also disappeared, caused such gloom, such distress, such apprehension that even the most thoughtless of those girls could scarcely have laughed or been merry. School-hours were still kept after a fashion, but there was no life in the lessons. In truth, it seemed as if the sun would never shine again at Lavender House.

Hester was ill; not very ill—she had no fever, she had no cold; she had, as the good doctor explained it, nothing at all wrong, except that her nervous system had got a shock.

"When the little one is found, Miss Hetty will be quite well again," said the good doctor; but the little one had not been found yet, and Hester had completely broken down. She lay on her bed, saying little or nothing, eating scarcely anything, sleeping not at all. All the girls were kind to her, and each one in the school took turns in trying to comfort her; but no one could win a smile from Hester, and even Mrs. Willis failed utterly to reach or touch her heart.

Mr. Everard came once to see her, but he had scarcely spoken many words when Hester broke into

an agony of weeping, and begged him to go away. He shook his head when he left her, and said sadly to himself—

"That girl has got something on her mind; she is grieving for more than the loss of her little sister."

The twentieth of June came at last, and the girls sat about in groups in the pleasant shady garden, and talked of the very sad breaking-up day they were to have on the morrow, and wondered if, when they returned to school again, Annie and little Nan would have been found. Cecil Temple, Dora Russell, and one or two others were sitting together, and whispering in low voices. Mary Price joined them, and said anxiously—

"I don't think the doctor is satisfied about Hester. Perhaps I ought not to have listened, but I heard him talking to Miss Danesbury just now; he said she must be got to sleep somehow, and she is to have a composing draught to-night."

"I wish poor Hetty would not turn away from us all," said Cecil; "I wish she would not quite give up hope; I do feel sure that Nan and Annie will be found yet."

"Have you been praying about it, Cecil?" asked Mary, kneeling on the grass, laying her elbows on Cecil's knees, and looking into her face. "Do you say this because you have faith?"

"I have prayed, and I have faith," replied Cecil in her simple, earnest way. "Why, Dora, what is the matter?"

"Only that it's horrid to leave like this," said Dora; "I—I thought my last day at school would have been so different, and somehow I am sorry I spoke so much against that poor little Annie."

Here Cecil suddenly rose from her seat, and, going up to Dora, clasped her arms round her neck.

"Thank you, Dora," she said with fervour; "I love you for those words."

"Here comes Susy," remarked Mary Price. "I really don't think *anything* would move Susy; she's just as stolid and indifferent as ever. Ah, Susy, here's a place for you—oh, what *is* the matter with Phyllis? see how she's rushing towards us! Phyllis, my dear, don't break your neck."

Susan, with her usual nonchalance, seated herself by Dora Russell's side. Phyllis burst excitedly into the group.

"I think," she exclaimed, "I really, really do think that news has come of Annie's father. Nora said that Janet told her that a foreign letter came this morning to Mrs. Willis, and somebody saw Mrs. Willis talking to Miss Danesbury—oh, I forgot, only I know that the girls of the school are whispering the news that Mrs. Willis cried, and Miss Danesbury said, 'After waiting for him four years, and now, when he comes back, he won't find her!' Oh dear, oh dear! there is Danesbury. Cecil, darling love, go to her, and find out the truth."

Cecil rose at once, went across the lawn, said a few words to Miss Danesbury, and came back to the other girls.

"It is true," she said sadly, "there came a letter this morning from Captain Forest; he will be at Lavender House in a week. Miss Danesbury says it is a wonderful letter, and he has been shipwrecked, and on an island by himself for ever so long; but he is safe now, and will soon be in England. Miss

Danesbury says Mrs. Willis can scarcely speak about that letter; she is in great, great trouble, and Miss Danesbury confesses that they are all more anxious than they dare to admit about Annie and little Nan."

At this moment the sound of carriage wheels was heard on the drive, and Susan, peering forward to see who was arriving, remarked in her usual nonchalant manner—

"Only the little Misses Bruce in their basket-carriage—what dull-looking women they are!"

Nobody commented, however, on her observation, and gradually the little group of girls sank into absolute silence.

From where they sat they could see the basket-carriage waiting at the front entrance—the little ladies had gone inside, all was perfect silence and stillness.

Suddenly on the stillness a sound broke—the sound of a girl running quickly; nearer and nearer came the steps, and the four or five who sat together under the oak-tree noticed the quick panting breath, and felt even before a word was uttered that evil tidings were coming to them. They all started to their feet, however; they all uttered a cry of horror and distress when Hester herself broke into their midst. She was supposed to be lying down in a darkened room, she was supposed to be very ill—what was she doing here?

"Hetty!" exclaimed Cecil.

Hester pushed past her; she rushed up to Susan Drummond, and seized her arm.

"News has come!" she panted; "news—news at last! Nan is found!—and Annie—they are both found—but Annie is dying. Come, Susan, come this moment; we must both tell what we know now."

By her impetuosity, by the intense fire of her passion and agony, even Susan was electrified into leaving her seat and going with her.

CHAPTER XLIX.

TWO CONFESSIONS.

HESTER dragged her startled and rather unwilling companion in through the front entrance, past some agitated-looking servants who stood about in the hall, and through the velvet curtains into Mrs. Willis's boudoir.

The Misses Bruce were there, and Mrs. Willis in her bonnet and cloak was hastily packing some things into a basket.

"I—I must speak to you," said Hester, going up to her governess. "Susan and I have got something to say, and we must say it here, now at once."

"No, not now, Hester," replied Mrs. Willis, looking for a moment into her pupil's agitated face. "Whatever you and Susan Drummond have to tell cannot be listened to by me at this moment. I have not an instant to lose."

"You are going to Annie?" asked Hester.

"Yes; don't keep me. Good-bye, my dears; good-bye."

Mrs. Willis moved towards the door. Hester, who felt almost beside herself, rushed after her, and caught her arm.

"Take us with you, take Susy and me with you—we must, we must see Annie before she dies."

"Hush, my child," said Mrs. Willis very quietly;

"try to calm yourself. Whatever you have got to say shall be listened to later on—now moments are precious, and I cannot attend to you. Calm yourself, Hester, and thank God for your dear little sister's safety. Prepare yourself to receive her, for the carriage which takes me to Annie will bring little Nan home."

Mrs. Willis left the room, and Hester threw herself on her knees and covered her face with her trembling hands. Presently she was aroused by a light touch on her arm; it was Susan Drummond.

"I may go now, I suppose, Hester? You are not quite determined to make a fool of me, are you?"

"I have determined to expose you, you coward; you mean, mean girl!" answered Hester, springing to her feet. "Come, I have no idea of letting you go. Mrs. Willis won't listen — we will find Mr. Everard."

Whether Susan would really have gone with Hester remains to be proved, but just at that moment all possibility of retreat was cut away from her by Miss Agnes Bruce, who quietly entered Mrs. Willis's private sitting-room, followed by the very man Hester was about to seek.

"I thought it best, my dear," she said, turning apologetically to Hester, "to go at once for our good clergyman; you can tell him all that is in your heart, and I will leave you. Before I go, however, I should like to tell you how I found Annie and little Nan."

Hester made no answer; just for a brief moment she raised her eyes to Miss Agnes's kind face, then they sought the floor.

"The story can be told in a few words, dear," said the little lady. "A workwoman of the name of

Williams, whom my sister and I have employed for years, and who lives near Oakley, called on us this morning to apologise for not being able to finish some needlework. She told us that she had a sick child, and also a little girl of three, in her house. She said she had found the child, in ragged gipsy garments, fainting in a field. She took her into her house, and, on undressing her, found that she was no true gipsy, but that her face and hands and arms had been dyed; she said the little one had been treated in a similar manner. Jane's suspicions and mine were instantly roused, and we went back with the woman to Oakley, and found, as we had anticipated, that the children were little Nan and Annie. The sad thing is that Annie is in high fever, and knows no one. We waited there until the doctor arrived, who spoke very, very seriously of her case. Little Nan is well, and asked for you."

With these last words Miss Agnes Bruce softly left the room, closing the door after her.

"Now, Susan," said Hester, without an instant's pause; "come, let us tell Mr. Everard of our wickedness. Oh, sir," she added, raising her eyes to the clergyman's face, "if Annie dies I shall go mad. Oh, I cannot, cannot bear life if Annie dies!"

"Tell me what is wrong, my poor child," said Mr. Everard. He laid his hand on her shoulder, and gradually and skilfully drew from the agitated and miserable girl the story of her sin, of her cowardice, and of her deep, though until now unavailing repentance. How from the first she had hated and disliked Annie; how unjustly she had felt towards her; how she had longed and hoped Annie was guilty; and how, when at last the clue was put into her hands to

prove Annie's absolute innocence, she had determined not to use it.

"From the day Nan was lost," continued Hester, "it has been all agony and all repentance; but, oh, I was too proud to tell! I was too proud to humble myself to the very dust!"

"But not now," said the clergyman very gently.

"No, no; not now. I care for nothing now in all the world except that Annie may live."

"You don't mind the fact that Mrs. Willis and all your schoolfellows must know of this, and must—must judge you accordingly?"

"They can't think worse of me than I think of myself. I only want Annie to live."

"No, Hester," answered Mr. Everard, "you want more than that—you want far more than that. It may be that God will take Annie Forest away. We cannot tell. With Him alone are the issues of life or death. What you really want, my child, is the forgiveness of the little girl you have wronged, and the forgiveness of your Father in heaven."

Hester began to sob wildly.

"If—if she dies—may I see her first?" she gasped.

"Yes; I will try and promise you that. Now, will you go to your room? I must speak to Miss Drummond alone; she is a far worse culprit than you."

Mr. Everard opened the door for Hester, who went silently out.

"Meet me in the chapel to-night," he whispered low in her ear, "I will talk with you and pray with you there."

He closed the door, and came back to Susan.

All throughout this interview his manner had been

very gentle to Hester; but the clergyman could be stern, and there was a gleam of very righteous anger in his eyes as he turned to the sullen girl who leaned heavily against the table.

"This narrative of Hester Thornton's is, of course, quite true, Miss Drummond?"

"Oh, yes; there seems to be no use in denying that," said Susan.

"I must insist on your telling me the exact story of your sin. There is no use in your attempting to deny anything; only the utmost candour on your part can now save you from being publicly expelled."

"I am willing to tell," answered Susan. "I meant no harm; it was done as a bit of fun. I had a cousin at home who was very clever at drawing caricatures, and I happened to have nothing to do one day, and I was alone in Annie's bedroom, and I thought I'd like to see what she kept in her desk. I always had a fancy for collecting odd keys, and I found one on my bunch which fitted her desk exactly. I opened it, and I found such a smart little caricature of Mrs. Willis. I sent the caricature to my cousin, and begged of her to make an exact copy of it. She did so, and I put Annie's back in her desk, and pasted the other into Cecil's book. I didn't like Dora Russell, and I wrapped up the sweeties in her theme; but I did the other for pure fun, for I knew Cecil would be so shocked; but I never guessed the blame would fall on Annie. When I found it did, I felt inclined to tell once or twice, but it seemed too much trouble, and, besides, I knew Mrs. Willis would punish me, and, of course, I didn't wish that.

"Dora Russell was always very nasty to me, and when I found she was putting on such airs, and pretend-

ing she could write such a grand essay for the prize, I thought I'd take down her pride a bit. I went to her desk, and I got some of the rough copy of the thing she was calling 'The River,' and I sent it off to my cousin, and my cousin made up such a ridiculous paper, and she hit off Dora's writing to the life, and, of course, I had to put it into Dora's desk and tear up her real copy. It was very unlucky Hester being in the room. Of course I never guessed that, or I wouldn't have gone. That was the night we all went with Annie to the fairies' field. I never meant to get Hester into a scrape, nor Annie either, for that matter; but, of course, I couldn't be expected to tell on myself."

Susan related her story in her usual monotonous and sing-song voice. There was no trace of apparent emotion on her face, or of regret in her tones. When she had finished speaking Mr. Everard was absolutely silent.

"I took a great deal of trouble," continued Susan, after a pause, in a slightly fretful key. "It was really nothing but a joke, and I don't see why such a fuss should have been made. I know I lost a great deal of sleep trying to manage that twine business round my foot. I don't think I shall trouble myself playing any more tricks upon school-girls—they are not worth it."

"You'll never play any more tricks on these girls," said Mr. Everard, rising to his feet, and suddenly filling the room and reducing Susan to an abject silence by the ring of his stern, deep voice. "I take it upon me, in the absence of your mistress, to pronounce your punishment. You leave Lavender House in disgrace this evening. Miss Good will take you home, and

explain to your parents the cause of your dismissal. You are not to see *any* of your school-fellows again. Your meanness, your cowardice, your sin require no words on my part to deepen their vileness. Through pure wantonness you have cast a cruel shadow on an innocent young life. If that girl dies, you indeed are not blameless in the cause of her early removal, for through you her heart and spirit were broken. Miss Drummond, I pray God you may at least repent and be sorry. There are some people mentioned in the Bible who are spoken of as past feeling. Wretched girl, while there is yet time, pray that you may not belong to them. Now I must leave you, but I shall lock you in. Miss Good will come for you in about an hour to take you away."

Susan Drummond sank down on the nearest seat, and began to cry softly; one or two pin-pricks from Mr. Everard's stern words may possibly have reached her shallow heart—no one can tell. She left Lavender House that evening, and none of the girls who had lived with her as their schoolmate heard of her again.

CHAPTER L.

THE HEART OF LITTLE NAN.

For several days now Annie had lain unconscious in Mrs. Williams's little bedroom; the kind-hearted woman could not find it in her heart to send the sick child away. Her husband and the neighbours expostulated with her, and said that Annie was only a poor little waif,

"She has no call on you," said Jane Allen, a hard-featured woman who lived next door. "Why should you put yourself out just for a sick lass? and she'll be much better off in the workhouse infirmary."

But Mrs. Williams shook her head at her hard-featured and hard-hearted neighbour, and resisted her husband's entreaties.

"Eh!" she said, "but the poor lamb needs a good bit of mothering, and I misdoubt me she wouldn't get much of that in the infirmary."

So Annie stayed, and tossed from side to side of her little bed, and murmured unintelligible words, and grew daily a little weaker and a little more delirious. The parish doctor called, and shook his head over her; he was not a particularly clever man, but he was the best the Williamses could afford. While Annie suffered and went deeper into that valley of humiliation and weakness which leads to the gate of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, little Nan played with Peggy Williams, and accustomed herself after the fashion of little children to all the ways of her new and humble home.

It was on the eighth day of Annie's fever that the Misses Bruce discovered her, and on the evening of that day Mrs. Willis knelt by her little favourite's bed. A better doctor had been called in, and all that money could procure had been got now for poor Annie; but the second doctor considered her case even more critical, and said that the close air of the cottage was much against her recovery.

"I didn't make that caricature; I took the girls into the fairies' field, but I never pasted that caricature into Cecil's book. I know you don't believe me, Cecil; but do you think I would really do any-

thing so mean about one whom I love? No, no! I am innocent! God knows it. Yes, I am glad of that—God knows it."

Over and over in Mrs. Willis's presence these piteous words would come from the fever-stricken child, but always when she came to the little sentence "God knows I am innocent," her voice would grow tranquil, and a faint and sweet smile would play round her lips.

Late that night a carriage drew up at a little distance from the cottage, and a moment or two afterwards Mrs. Willis was called out of the room to speak to Cecil Temple.

"I have found out the truth about Annie; I have come at once to tell you," she said; and then she repeated the substance of Hester's and Susan's story.

"God help me for having misjudged her," murmured the head-mistress; then she bade Cecil "good night" and returned to the sick-room.

The next time Annie broke out with her piteous wail, "They believe me guilty—Mrs. Willis does—they all do," the mistress laid her hand with a firm and gentle pressure on the child's arm.

"Not now, my dear," she said, in a slow, clear, and emphatic voice. "God has shown your governess the truth, and she believes in you."

The very carefully-uttered words pierced through the clouded brain; for a moment Annie lay quite still, with her bright and lovely eyes fixed on her teacher.

"Is that really you?" she asked.

"I am here, my darling."

"And you believe in me?"

"I do most absolutely."

"God does, too, you know," answered Annie—bringing out the words quickly, and turning her head to the other side. The fever had once more gained supremacy, and she rambled on unceasingly through the dreary night.

Now, however, when the passionate words broke out, "They believe me guilty," Mrs. Willis always managed to quiet her by saying, "I know you are innocent."

The next day at noon those girls who had not gone home—for many had started by the morning train—were wandering aimlessly about the grounds. Mr. Everard had gone to see Annie, and had promised to bring back the latest tidings about her.

Hester, holding little Nan's hand—for she could scarcely bear to have her recovered treasure out of sight—had wandered away from the rest of her companions, and had seated herself with Nan under a large oak-tree which grew close to the entrance of the avenue. She had come here in order to be the very first to see Mr. Everard on his return. Nan had climbed into Hester's lap, and Hester had buried her aching head in little Nan's bright curls, when she started suddenly to her feet and ran forward. Her quick ears had detected the sound of wheels.

How soon Mr. Everard had returned; surely the news was bad! She flew to the gate, and held it open in order to avoid the short delay which the lodge-keeper might cause in coming to unfasten it. She flushed however, vividly, and felt half inclined to retreat into the shade, when she saw that the

gentleman who was approaching was not Mr. Everard, but a tall, handsome, and foreign-looking man, who drove a light dog-cart himself. The moment he saw Hester with little Nan clinging to her skirts he stopped short.

"Is this Lavender House, little girl?"

"Yes, sir," replied Hester.

"And can you tell me—but of course you know—you are one of the young ladies who live here, eh?"

Hester nodded.

"Then you can tell me if Mrs. Willis is at home—but of course she is."

"No, sir," answered Hester; "I am sorry to tell you that Mrs. Willis is away. She has been called away on very, very sad business; she won't come back to-night."

Something in Hester's tone caused the stranger to look at her attentively; he jumped off the dog-cart and came to her side.

"See, here, Miss——"

"Thornton," put in Hester.

"Yes, Miss—Miss Thornton, perhaps you can manage for me as well as Mrs. Willis; after all I don't particularly want to see her. If you belong to Lavender House, you, of course, know my—I mean you have a schoolmate here, a little, pretty gipsy rogue called Forest—little Annie Forest. I want to see her—can you take me to her?"

"You are her father?" gasped Hester.

"Yes, my dear child, I am her father. Now you can take me to her at once."

Hester covered her face.

"Oh, I cannot," she said—"I cannot take you to Annie. Oh, sir, if you knew all, you would feel

inclined to kill me. Don't ask me about Annie —don't, don't."

The stranger looked fairly non-plussed and not a little alarmed. Just at this moment Nan's tiny fingers touched his hand.

"Me'll take 'oo to my Annie," she said— "mine poor Annie. Annie's vedy sick, but me'll take 'oo."

The tall, foreign-looking man lifted Nan into his arms.

"Sick, is she?" he answered. "Look here young lady," he added, turning to Hester, "whatever you have got to say, I am sure you will try and say it; you will pity a father's anxiety and master your own feelings. Where *is* my little girl?"

Hester hastily dried her tears.

"She is in a cottage near Oakley, sir."

"Indeed! Oakley is some miles from here?"

"And she is very ill."

"What of?"

"Fever; they—they fear she may die."

"Take me to her," said the stranger. "If she is ill and dying she wants me. Take me to her at once. Here, jump on the dog-cart; and, little one, you shall come too."

So furiously did Captain Forest drive that in a very little over an hour's time his panting horse stopped at a few steps from the cottage. He called to a boy to hold him, and, accompanied by Hester, and carrying Nan in his arms, he stood on the threshold of Mrs. Williams' humble little abode. Mr. Everard was coming out.

"Hester," he said, "you here? I was coming for you."

"Oh, then she is worse?"

"She is conscious, and has asked for you. Yes, she is very, very ill."

"Mr. Everard, this gentleman is Annie's father."

Mr. Everard looked pityingly at Captain Forest.

"You have come back at a sad hour, sir," he said. "But no, it cannot harm her to see you. Come with me."

Captain Forest went first into the sick-room; Hester waited outside. She had the little kitchen to herself, for all the Williamses, with the exception of the good mother, had moved for the time being to other quarters. Surely Mr. Everard would come for her in a moment? Surely Captain Forest, who had gone into the sick-room with Nan in his arms, would quickly return? There was no sound. All was absolute quiet. How soon would Hester be summoned? Could she—could she bear to look at Annie's dying face? Her agony drove her down on her knees.

"Oh, if you would only spare Annie!" she prayed to God. Then she wiped her eyes. This terrible suspense seemed more than she could bear. Suddenly the bedroom door was softly and silently opened, and Mr. Everard came out.

"She sleeps," he said; "there is a shadow of hope. Little Nan has done it. Nan asked to lie down beside her, and she said, 'Poor Annie! poor Annie!' and stroked her cheek; and in some way, I don't know how, the two have gone to sleep together. Annie did not even glance at her father; she was quite taken up with Nan. You can come to the door and look at her, Hester."

Hester did so. A time had been when she could

scarcely have borne that sight without a pang of jealousy; now she turned to Mr. Everard:

"I—I could even give her the heart of little Nan to keep her here," she murmured.

CHAPTER LI.

THE PRIZE ESSAY.

ANNIE did not die. The fever passed away in that long and refreshing sleep, while Nan's cool hand lay against her cheek. She came slowly, slowly back to life—to a fresh, a new, and a glad life. Hester, from being her enemy, was now her dearest and warmest friend. Her father was at home again, and she could no longer think or speak of herself as lonely or sad. She recovered, and in future days reigned as a greater favourite than ever at Lavender House. It is only fair to say that Tiger never went back to the gipsies, but devoted himself first and foremost to Annie, and then to the Captain, who pronounced him a capital dog, and when he heard his story vowed he never would part with him.

Owing to Annie's illness, and to all the trouble and confusion which immediately ensued, Mrs. Willis did not give away her prizes at the usual time; but when her scholars once more assembled at Lavender House she astonished several of them by a few words.

"My dears," she said, standing in her accustomed place at the head of the long schoolroom, "I intend now, before our first day of lessons begins, to distribute those prizes which would have been yours, under

"MRS. WILLIS . . . PLACED A LOCKET . . . ROUND HER NECK" (*p.* 287).

ordinary circumstances, on the twenty-first of June. The prizes will be distributed during the afternoon recess; but here, and now, I wish to say something about—and also to give away—the prize for English composition. Six essays, all written with more or less care, have been given to me to inspect. There are reasons which we need not now go into which made it impossible to me to say anything in favour of a theme called 'The River,' written by my late pupil, Miss Russell; but I can cordially praise a very nice historical sketch of Marie Antoinette, the work of Hester Thornton. Mary Price has also written a study which pleases me much, as it shows thought and even a little originality. The remainder of the six essays simply reach an ordinary average. You will be surprised therefore, my dears, to learn that I do not award the prize to any of these themes, but rather to a seventh composition, which was put into my hands yesterday by Miss Danesbury. It is crude and unfinished, and doubtless but for her recent illness would have received many corrections; but these few pages, which are called 'A Lonely Child,' drew tears from my eyes; crude as they are, they have the merit of real originality. They are too morbid to read to you, girls, and I sincerely trust and pray the young writer may never pen anything so sad again. Such as they are, however, they rank first in the order of merit, and the prize is hers. Annie, my dear, come forward."

Annie left her seat, and, amid the cheers of her companions, went up to Mrs. Willis, who placed a locket, attached to a slender gold chain, round her neck; the locket contained a miniature of the head-mistress's much-loved face.

"After all, think of our Annie Forest turning out clever, as well as being the prettiest and dearest girl in the school!" exclaimed several of her companions.

"Only I do wish," added one, "that Mrs. Willis had let us see the essay. Annie, treasure, come here; tell us what the 'Lonely Child' was about."

"I don't remember," answered Annie. "I don't know what loneliness means now, so how can I describe it?"

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